

PLUCK AND LUCK

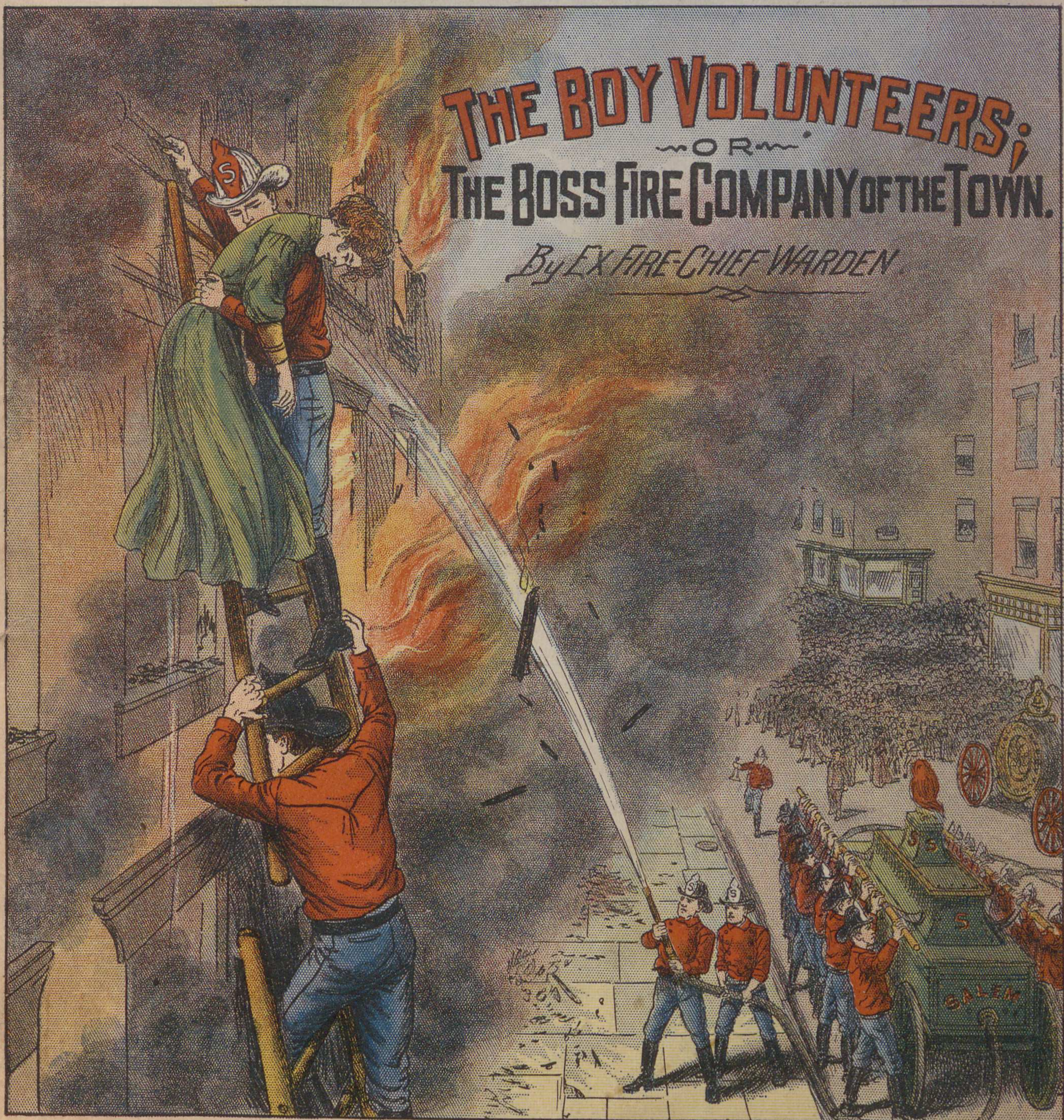
STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

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PRICE 5 CENTS.

The Boy Volunteers

OR,

The Boss Fire Company of the Town

By EX-FIRE-CHIEF WARDEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE YOUTH AND THE COIL OF ROPE.

A cry of fire!

Clang, clang, clang!

The great fire-bell sent the alarm all over the town.

The volunteer members of four fire companies, brave, manly fellows, threw down tools, yard-sticks and other implements of their calling, and ran toward different engine-houses at full speed.

In an almost incredibly short space of time four fire engines were dashing down the streets of the town of Salem in the direction of the fire.

The scene of conflagration was in the center of the town, in the heart of the business portion.

The building was a tall, frame structure of four stories. The lower part was used as a store; the upper floors held three happy families, who had resided there some two or three years.

The fire began in the store, and made such rapid headway that no member of the families above could escape by the stairs.

When the fire companies arrived the ladders were run up immediately, and the work of rescuing the inmates began.

But a frame building that had stood the heat of five summers was like a pile of tinder.

It burned like pine shavings, and in a very few minutes huge volumes of smoke were pouring out of every window.

The street below was filled with eager, excited people, who yelled advice to those in peril with a freedom and earnestness that was appalling.

On the top floor lived a family of the name of Banning, consisting of a man, wife and daughter. The latter was a beautiful girl of sixteen, with sparkling black eyes, raven tresses, and a face of remarkable beauty.

Mr. Banning was away at work, Mrs. Banning had gone out shopping, leaving her daughter, Myrtis, alone in the rooms.

Myrtis was fast asleep when the fire broke out, and knew nothing of it till she was awakened by being nearly strangled with smoke.

She sprang up and ran to the door, to find the stairs in a sheet of flame.

Then she ran to the window and looked out at the street full of people below.

A great shout came up from a thousand throats.

She was appalled at the danger that threatened her.

"Save me! Save me!" she cried, reaching out both hands toward the people below.

A cry of sympathy came up in response to her appeal, and the brave firemen redoubled their efforts to reach her.

The discovery was suddenly made that the ladders were too short to reach the window.

A brave fireman ran up to the top of the ladder, but only to find himself ten feet below the window.

A cry of horror went up.

"Jump!" called the stalwart fireman, reaching up toward her.

But the peril was too great. She would not jump to certain death.

The peril increased every moment.

In a couple of minutes more the flames would take her in their fiery embrace, and that would be the last of her.

Suddenly a youth of nineteen was seen climbing a telegraph pole in front of the burning building.

He had a coil of rope hanging on his shoulder.

The rapidity with which he ascended the tall pole caused hundreds of people to look in that direction for a moment.

He was recognized as Jack Nelson, one of the pluckiest young fellows in Salem—a clerk in Burdock's store.

He was on his way to deliver the coil of rope to a customer when he was stopped by the fire.

Up, up he climbed till he struck the wires—about a dozen in number.

Then he straddled the dozen wires and pulled himself along some ten feet from the pole, which brought him directly opposite the window of Myrtis Banning.

Every eye in the crowd below was now centered on him.

He uncoiled the rope he carried on his shoulder. Then he tied a knot in one end and called out to the girl:

"Catch it, Myrtis!" and swung it toward her.

The girl had recognized him, and clutched at the rope with the frantic energy of the last hope.

"Tie it round your waist!" cried Jack.

She obeyed him promptly, and in another minute the knotted end of the rope was tied securely around the slender waist.

"Now throw yourself out!" he cried.

"Oh, Jack, I can't!"

"But you will have to," he said. "You'll then swing down all right."

"But if I should fall!"

"You won't fall. I've got hold of this end. I'll hold you up."

The girl looked down and shuddered.

She dreaded to swing so high over the heads of the people, taking the chances of escaping a fall.

"Jump, or I'll pull you out!" called Jack, pulling on the rope.

Of the thousands below not a voice was raised.

A terrible suspense had settled upon the multitude.

"Oh, Jack!" she cried, not daring to make the leap.

But the flames drove her to climb out of the window, and the next moment Jack gave the rope a jerk.

A piercing scream burst from her lips, and the next moment she was swinging in the air thirty feet above the heads of the firemen, and some ten feet below the telegraph wires.

The combined weight of the two told heavily on the wires, but brave Jack straddled them tenaciously, and held on to the rope like grim death.

Myrtis screamed with terror. The people shouted, and Jack lowered her steadily, though she was a heavy load for him to manage.

Just then Mrs. Banning came upon the scene, and raised a tremendous excitement by trying to get into the burning building.

She did not recognize the girl in the air as her daughter, and as two stalwart firemen held her back she continually cried out:

"My child! My child! Oh, let me save her!"

"She is safe!" said one of the firemen.

But she was too frantic to understand what was said to her.

By degrees Myrtis was lowered to the ground amid the wildest cheering ever heard.

The people went mad in their joyous enthusiasm over the wonderful escape of the beautiful young girl.

But when she reached the earth and was clasped in the arms of her parents, people cried and thanked God for the brave boy on the telegraph wires.

"God bless you, Jack!" came up to him from a thousand throats, and when he descended the pole the crowd took him on their shoulders and carried him around the block in triumph, shouting and swinging their hats in the air.

Jack was the hero of the hour, and he bore the honors like the brave, modest lad he was.

But he did not like being carried around on men's shoulders that way, and so he asked them to let him down. Instead of doing so they carried him on their shoulders to the store where he was employed, and gave him an ovation such as would have warmed the heart of the Governor of the State.

"What's the meaning of this?" Mr. Burdock asked, running to the door of the store and staring at the crowd.

He was soon told the story, and then he felt like hugging the brave boy, for he was a warm-hearted, generous man.

Grasping Jack's hand, he wrung it warmly, saying:

"Jack, my boy, I am proud of you!"

"I lost the rope, sir," said Jack. "They grabbed me the moment I came down the pole, and I——"

"Never mind the rope, Jack," said the merchant. "We'll

send another one to Mr. Meadows. I am glad enough to give a rope to save a human life. Did the girl get hurt?"

"No, sir," replied a dozen at once.

"Any lives lost?"

"Not one."

"That's good news. How did the fire begin?"

"Don't know," came from a score. "The whole building is gone."

The brave firemen worked hard to save the other buildings in the block, and not till two other houses went down did they succeed in checking the conflagration.

CHAPTER II.

A GALLANT RESCUE.

The daring exploit of young Jack Nelson in rescuing Myrtis Banning from certain death was the theme of conversation in Salem for many days thereafter.

He had been a silent admirer of Myrtis for months, but had not pressed his attentions upon her for the reason that he believed she had a liking for a young dude—the son of a rich merchant.

But his exploit had knocked out the dude completely. She would talk about nothing else but Jack, until the dude was sick of the very name.

She went to Burdock's store two days after the fire to see and thank him for saving her life. Two ladies accompanied her.

"I want to thank you for saving my life, Jack," she said, extending her hand to him. "I owe you my life—a debt of a lifetime."

"Don't mention it, Myrtis," he replied. "I only did what others tried to do. I am glad you escaped unhurt, but sorry you lost all your things."

"Oh, we don't mind that," she said. "We are so glad that I escaped that papa and mamma say they don't mind anything lost. Papa secured a floor to-day, and mamma is buying the furniture and bedding. You will come and see us, will you not?"

"Oh, yes, if you would like to have me do so," he replied.

"Of course I would like to have you call. I always liked you, Jack."

Jack blushed like a girl, and said he would be sure to call.

Strange to say, nearly every fireman in the four companies took offense at the fulsome praise showered on young Nelson, who was not a fireman.

When the fire companies were organized no one under twenty-one years of age was allowed to join. Jack was but nineteen when he distinguished himself by rescuing Myrtis Banning, hence could not be a fireman.

The papers made matters worse by praising Jack's heroism and tact as being somewhat superior to that of the firemen.

At last some of the firemen made remarks that incensed Jack's friends, and Jack expressed the wish that he and his companions could have an engine and company of their own.

"Organize a company, Jack," said Myrtis, "and I'll go to all the merchants in Salem, and beg them to buy another engine for you."

That started the young hero.

He went round among the boys of evenings with a paper getting names. At the end of a week he had half a hundred names of boys between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one years on his list.

They had all watched the companies so closely that they really had little to learn in the way of firemen's duties.

True to her promise, Myrtis sought the prominent merchants and begged them to buy an engine for the boys.

They took hold with a hearty good will, and in a month's time the engine was bought and paid for, together with a hook and ladder truck—all complete.

Then the city council took action in the matter, and gave them an engine house, where the boys met and adopted a uniform and a name for their company.

Their uniform was to be black trousers and red shirt and fireman's hat, with white leather belt, and for a name they agreed to call themselves The Salem Boys' Fire Company.

Jack Nelson was made foreman, and he lost no time in putting the boys through a drill that promised them a future they would have reason to be proud of.

They met every evening at their engine house to make themselves perfect in everything pertaining to their duties, and were laughed at by the other firemen, who threatened to squirt water on 'em if they got in their way at a fire.

At last Jack notified the mayor that at the next alarm of fire the Salem Boys would be on hand to help in the work of saving life and property.

A week later the alarm came, and every fireman in town made a dash for the engine houses.

The fire was on one of the main business streets, in a large building four stories high, and to the surprise of all the other firemen, the Salem Boys were the first to reach it.

They had a ladder up and a stream of water going when the first of the other companies came up.

The chief of the fire department came up and gazed at the boys for a few minutes, and then said:

"They do as well as the others."

"They are in our way," said Foreman Hutchins, of Salem No. 3, to the chief.

"Don't you get in their way," the chief replied. "They are the first on the ground, and are doing good service. Look there! They are taking the girls out of the third-story windows! Up with your ladders and help them!"

No. 3 had to obey the chief, and in another minute they were doing their best to save the girls.

Suddenly a girl appeared at a window on the top floor and shrieked for help.

There was no ladder on the ground that could reach above the third story.

A cry of horror burst from the crowd below, for the idea of a young girl burning to death in the sight of those who are trying to save her, is absolutely revolting to men of even brutal instincts.

"What shall we do?" the foreman of No. 3 asked the fire chief. "Our ladders can't reach her, and nobody can enter the building."

Before the chief could make any reply, Jack Nelson seized a short ladder and ran up the long one with it.

Everybody stared at him in amazement. The young girl had fallen back from the window, having been overcome by terror and smoke.

But the young hero never faltered for a moment. He reached the top of the long ladder, braced himself firmly, and then balanced the shorter one on his shoulders, thus making it reach to within a couple of feet of the upper window.

Then the crowd below saw his object, and the chief of the fire department was the first to applaud him.

Billy Malone, a small, wiry, little fellow, climbed upon Jack's shoulders and crept up the shorter ladder, amid the breathless suspense of the crowd below and the roaring of the flames in the building.

Reaching the window, Billy reached inside and caught hold of the girl. She had fainted.

He was strong, and in another minute he had her across his shoulder and was slowly descending with her.

Wild hurrahs went up from the astonished people below. Their shouts fairly shook the buildings around.

But when he reached Jack Nelson's shoulders, and handed the girl down to him, who could use but one hand to aid him, the cheers went up like the roar of the ocean in a storm.

The terrible strain on Jack caused him to let the ladder fall when the daring young fireman climbed down off his shoulders, and it went crashing below, narrowly missing one of the firemen of No. 3.

But Billy carried the young girl safely down the long ladder, and Jack followed, ready to drop from sheer fatigue. The wild enthusiasm of the crowd broke out anew, and Jack and Billy were the only names that could be heard.

Both boys were seized by the boisterous mob, and hoisted on stalwart shoulders.

"Let us down, fellows!" cried Jack. "We have work to do yet!"

"You've done enough to-day, my boy," cried a strong-voiced man in the crowd.

Jack raised his trumpet to his lips and called out to his boys:

"Salem Boys, do your duty. Keep up a steady stream!"

"All right, Jack!" they responded.

"Now let me down, fellows," he asked again, turning to the men who had him and Billy Malone on their shoulders.

But they would not.

"Turn the water on here," he called through the trumpet to the Salem Boys, and in another moment the stream of water was turned on the crowd, wetting Jack and Billy with the rest.

It caused a lively stampede, and the two young heroes were dropped with haste, and allowed to go back to the post of duty.

The fire was prevented from spreading, but the building was entirely destroyed where it started. Yet the water was kept going as long as a spark of fire remained, and then, when water controlled the premises, they took their departure and returned to their quarters.

CHAPTER III.

OLD MAG MULLINS' MUTTERINGS.

The next morning the papers were full of accounts of the fire. Everybody was eager to get all the news, and so every copy printed had a reader.

One paper said the Salem Boys' Fire Company was the first on the ground, threw the first stream of water, put up the first ladder, and rescued the first person saved. Then followed a graphic description of Jack and Billy's daring rescue of the young work girl from the top floor, ending with the sentence:

"The Salem Boys' Company is the boss fire company of the town."

Of course, that made our young heroes glad, and the older firemen mad, and a bad feeling at once arose between the boys and the other four companies.

The chief of the fire department tried hard to allay the ill-feeling, but could not do so. The entire force was voluntary in character and service, and hence the men exercised more or less independence in their individual capacities.

Some threatened to resign if any more individual comparisons were made in the press. But many others said nothing, though they did not like the appearance of the nimble-footed boys in the fire department of the town.

To add to the disgust of the older firemen, all the young ladies in the town began to extol the Salem Boys as young heroes, and wore their colors on all occasions.

"It's a craze," said an old fireman, very philosophically, one day, "which nothing can stop till it has run its course. It's the fashion just now, but it won't last long," and he knocked the ashes from his pipe and went about his business with an air of heroic resignation.

But the younger firemen were not so philosophical in their view of the case. They believed that a conspiracy had been formed among the boys and their friends to monopolize the honors of the service.

Said one in his anger:

"I believe that they had notice of that fire at least five minutes before we did, which shows that there is some kind of conspiracy against us. The idea that a pack of boys can do better and quicker work than as many grown men can is utterly absurd!"

"Yes, that's so," said another. "I am going to watch 'em hereafter. Jack Nelson is a brave fellow, and I have always been his friend. But if he wants to find out what we really can do, he can be satisfied so quickly as to make his head swim."

"If people knew as much about Jack as I do," remarked another fireman, shaking his head significantly, "they wouldn't think him much of a hero."

"What do you know?" three or four asked at once.

"I know enough," said the man, shaking his head, "and if Jack doesn't subside a little I'll give him dead away, and lay him out so completely that all the water his boys could throw on him couldn't clean him."

That was meat to the envious ones of the older firemen, and in less than a week every member of the four companies had heard that one of their number was in possession of facts that affected the character of Jack Nelson, the foreman of the Salem Boys' Fire Company.

"What the deuce is it you know, Tom?" one of the other firemen asked.

"I know enough and yet don't know half," and Tom Bussy shook his head significantly as he spoke.

"Well, why in thunder don't you tell us what you do know, and let us find out the rest?" queried Jim Hicks.

Tom looked at his brother fireman in silence for a minute or two, and then shook his head, saying:

"One had better be careful how he talks nowadays. I don't want to get into any trouble by talking about other people. I'll tell you all about it some other time."

"When will that some other time be, Tom?" Jim asked.

"Oh, to-night, maybe," and he looked around at a young man who was standing not far off, of whom he appeared to be suspicious.

The young man went away on finding himself regarded suspiciously, and then Tom said:

"Old Mag Mullins, down in Jackson's Lane, can tell you all about it. She has known all about him ever since he was born."

"Ah, she'll tell us, will she?"

"Reckon she will. I've heard her say a good deal myself."

"She's very old, isn't she?"

"Yes—seventy-five, at least."

"And she knows all about Jack?"

"Lord, yes. She hints at mysterious murder and all that sort of thing."

"Good Heavens!" gasped Jim Hicks. "We must look into this thing, boys. We are all firemen, you know, and have a pride in keeping disreputable characters out of the fire department."

"Yes, that's so," said Tom, nodding his head to the others, "and I'll see if we can't have a talk with the old woman."

"Let's see her as soon as possible. The young villain is brave and reckless, and just the sort of fellow to captivate everybody with exploits that challenge admiration. But if he is a villain of a blackened reputation the people ought to know it, and the sooner they do the better."

The other three agreed with him, and so it was arranged that Tom and Jim were to call on old Mag Mullins that night, at a little old frame house down in Jackson Lane, where she lived with a married grand-daughter.

Tom was the only one who was acquainted with the old lady—and he made her acquaintance through her grand-daughter's husband, Ed Slaughter, a shopmate of his.

That evening Slaughter was surprised at receiving a visit from Tom Bussy and Jim Hicks. He knew Hicks by sight, but had never been introduced to him.

Of course, Ed had to make it pleasant for his visitors, and the usual custom was resorted to.

He sent for a pitcher of beer, and then they sat around a table and drank and talked.

Mrs. Slaughter was a lively, bustling young woman, who liked fun as much as anybody did, and so she and her husband succeeded in making it pleasant for the two visitors.

The old lady sat in a corner peering into the fire, as if long-forgotten memories flitted in and out among the glowing coals. She seemed to take not the least interest in the conversation going on round the table.

In her hands she held a half-knitted stocking, while a ball of worsted rested in her lap.

Suddenly she heard Ed say:

"Yes, Jack Nelson is a brave fellow, and no mistake. He don't seem to care any more for fire than a salamander does."

"That's so," said Hicks. "I never saw such a fellow for recklessness. Why, I wouldn't think of doing the things that he does for all the wealth of Salem."

"Ah, Jack is a wild boy!" said the old lady, "an' when he comes to have his accounts settled he'll be in a bad way. Yes, in a bad way—a bad way," and the old lady shook her head, and gazed into the fire as earnestly as if she had been speaking to the coals, instead of the people around the table.

"Why, what has Jack done that is so bad, Aunt Mag?" Tom Bussy asked, turning to the old lady.

"Oh, never mind grandma," said Mrs. Slaughter, in a whisper.

"Bad enough," said the old lady. "When the grave gives up its dead the whole truth will be known, and justice will be done then if not before. Yes, it will be done then. Oh, the blood! The sin—the crime of that awful night. Yes, and they say Jack is now a bold fireman. Well—well—he'll have fire enough after awhile, and he can't put it out, either. Ha, ha, ha—he'll be fooled, then! He can't put it out!"

Tom and Jim stared at each other in blank astonishment.

"What does she mean, Ed?" Tom Bussy asked, turning to Slaughter.

"Oh, she talks that way every time she hears Jack's name mentioned, but won't tell us all she means."

"Does she know Jack?"

"I guess she does. She came from where Jack was born and reared."

"Where is that?"

"Mayfield."

"Oh, he came from Mayfield?"

"Yes."

"Well, we didn't know that."

"Yes, in Mayfield," continued the old woman. "In Mayfield. They did it all in Mayfield, and all that the wrong child might have the property. Oh, it's right that justice is meted out to

wrongdoers in the next world when it fails in this one. Jack Nelson ought to be in the blackest dungeon in this world instead of running to fires, and——"

Something struck the side of the house with the force of a cannon ball, shaking it from floor to roof. The women screamed, and the men ran out to see what caused it.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TONGUE OF SLANDER.

Out on the street the three men ran up and down the block in quest of the one who had thrown the stone—for such it proved to be—against the side of the house.

But they failed to find a single soul anywhere on the block.

"It's very strange," said Ed. "I never knew that to happen before. Just look at the size of that stone, will you?" and he pointed to a stone which the flickering light from the gas-lamp across the street revealed to him at his feet.

Tom picked up the stone.

"Why, it weighs at least ten pounds!" he exclaimed.

Jim took it in his hands and held it out as if to guess its weight.

"Yes, all of that," he said, "and it was thrown by a mighty strong arm, too."

"Of course it was. No boy could hurl a stone of that size. A little more force would have sent it through the house. I am a poor man, but I will give ten dollars to know the man who threw it."

"I'd give five," said Tom.

"So would I," added Jim. "I'd like to drop it on his head."

Ed took the stone and carried it in the house.

Tom and Jim followed him.

They sat down to the table.

The rock was laid on the table by the pitcher of beer, in which there was one more round of drinks.

The old woman sat looking in the fire, whiter than they had ever seen her before.

She did not seem even to hear what the others were saying, so intent was she in watching the little coals in the grate.

"You were saying something about Jack Nelson, Aunt Mag," said Tom, offering her a glass of beer from the pitcher.

She never noticed the remark or the glass of beer, but gazed steadily at the fire.

"What about Jack, Aunt Mag?" Tom asked, nudging her with his elbow.

"Huh?" she answered, looking around at him.

"Have a glass of beer?"

She took the glass.

But her hand trembled with the weakness of old age as she bore it to her lips.

When she had swallowed the contents of the glass, Tom reached over and took it from her hand.

"What were you saying about Jack, Aunt Mag?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"What were you saying about Jack, Aunt Mag?"

"Huh?"

"Is she deaf?" Tom asked of Ed, in a whisper.

"Not very much," replied Ed. "I guess the shock of that stone against the side of the house has rather upset her. I would not ask her any more about it to-night."

"Jack is in everybody's mouth just now," put in Hicks, "and everything connected with him is of interest, you know."

"Yes, that's so. She talks pretty freely sometimes, and then shuts up suddenly, like a clam."

Tom made several efforts to make the old woman talk again, but all in vain.

She would not understand anything he said, seeming to be like one mesmerized, or under some kind of overpowering influence which rendered her incapable of comprehending anything said to her in reference to Jack Nelson.

"I never saw her exactly in that mood before," said Ed, looking sideways at her. "She seems to be laboring under some kind of a spell."

"Is she excited?"

"She doesn't seem to be."

"Grandma," said Mrs. Slaughter, "it's ten o'clock."

"Huh?"

"It's ten o'clock—your bedtime, you know."

The old woman arose, and, leaning heavily on a cane, followed her granddaughter out of the room, leaving the three men together at the table.

"I'd like to know who threw that stone," remarked Ed.

The others were far more interested in knowing what the old lady knew about Jack.

But Ed did not suspect the motive of the visit, and so he continued to talk about everything else but Jack, to their infinite disgust.

At last they came away, promising to come around some other evening and have a quiet, social game of cards with Ed and his wife.

They walked a couple of blocks after leaving the cottage ere they uttered a word about the object of their visit.

"Tom," said Hicks, "that old woman holds a mysterious crime locked up in her memory as sure as fate."

"Just what I was thinking," replied Tom, "and I think we would have gotten hold of some of it if that stone hadn't struck as it did."

"No doubt of it. I'd like to drop that stone on the fellow's head who threw it."

"So would I. That old woman must give us that secret. If I could get her to drink about three or four glasses of beer I think her tongue would be loose enough to tell all she knows. There's a murder somewhere in all that mystery. That's something I didn't think of Jack, though."

"I say, Tom, how old is Jack?"

"About nineteen or twenty, I should say."

"How long has he been in Salem?"

"Some two or three years."

"Where do his parents live?"

"I don't know whether they live anywhere—think they are dead."

"Well, we know enough to set us on the track of Nelson. That there is something behind all this that will lay him out as thin as boarding-house butter on bread I'd bet my last nickel."

"So would I," remarked the other, "but I would like to know just what it is."

"Yes, of course."

They were both at their engine-house the next night, where the firemen had a thousand questions to ask them about what they had learned of Jack.

It did not take them long to tell all they had heard. But that was enough to make mischief sufficient for an ordinary lifetime.

Every fireman who took an interest in the dirty work told what he had heard in his own way, each one adding a little embellishment of the warmth and color of his own fancy.

The result was that it was whispered all over Salem in a few days that Jack Nelson was guilty of all the crimes in the calendar before he came to Salem.

Somebody told Myrtis Banning that Jack had been mixed

up in a horrible murder two or three years ago in another town.

It was a young man—a member of one of the old fire companies—who told her the story.

"I don't believe it," she said. "Nor do you believe it."

"I don't know anything about it," said the young man, shrugging his shoulders.

"But you repeat it to his injury."

"People ought to know if it is true."

"But you repeat it without knowing whether it is true or not."

"Oh, if he is innocent it can't hurt him."

"Well, I shall tell him what you have said, and then tell you what he says. Then I shall watch to see if you will repeat his version or repeat the one you have just told me."

"Oh, I didn't mean to do him any injury," said the young man.

"You didn't?"

"No."

"Well, that's strange. You have not said a good word about him this evening, and yet told a story which, if true, would ruin him forever."

The young man went away very sorry that he had made the mistake of repeating the story to Myrtis.

Two evenings later Jack called on Myrtis at her invitation, and heard the story for the first time.

He was astounded.

"That is going too far," he said. "I shall see if I can't trace it up to the fountain head."

"You won't get into a fight about it, will you?" she asked.

"I don't know. That depends upon how I am treated when I ask about the story. I'll tackle Henry Wildey, your informant, first, and make him tell me where he got the story."

He lost no time in hunting up Wildey.

Both of them were clerks in the same block.

But Wildey was of the dude order, being the son of a very aristocratic widow of Salem.

It was about noon the next day when Jack met Wildey in the street in front of the store where he was employed.

"I say, Wildey," he said, "will you be kind enough to give me the name of the one who told you the story you repeated to Myrtis Banning the other night?"

"No, I cannot."

"Why not?"

"Because it was told to me by a friend."

"But your friend injured me by telling the story."

"Not much. He only told me."

"Oh, I suppose I could not be injured with you. But you will give me his name or take a thrashing right here."

"What! Do you dare to——"

"Oh, yes. Will you give me the name?"

"No."

The word had scarcely passed young Wildey's lips when Jack knocked him down by a blow between the eyes.

People at once ran forward to see a fight.

Wildey scrambled to his feet and put up his fists.

Down he went again.

Up he came and faced Jack once more.

Jack gave him a couple of blows next time that caused him to prefer to lie down than get up.

By this time a police officer came along and arrested both of them.

They were followed to the station house, where bail was promptly given for both of them, and then they went their respective ways.

The news of the fight soon spread, and that evening nothing else was talked of in the five fire engine houses of Salem.

CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER RESCUE.

Henry Wildey was badly bruised about the face—so much so that he bore the marks of the sturdy blows of the young fireman for over a week.

On the other hand, Jack had not received a blow.

He was as chipper as a bird, and shook hands with all the young firemen who called to congratulate him.

The magistrate, when he heard Jack's side of the story, which Wildey himself did not deny, dismissed the case with the remark that Wildey only got what he deserved.

But the story went flying in every direction, and every time it was repeated it assumed worse forms than ever.

Many people there were who believed because they heard so much of it.

"If there was no truth in it there would not be so much of it," said one man. "I never saw much smoke in the air without being able to find some fire if I looked for it."

One day Jack received a very clear cut from one with whom he had been quite friendly, and it cut him to the quick.

A day or two later he saw that a couple of girls seemed like icebergs when he approached them.

"Good Lord!" he said to himself. "There is a conspiracy to ruin me at work among those firemen, and I can't find out who they are. I am going to put a card in the papers, asking that somebody make a charge against me in writing, so that I can meet the slander and put it to rest."

He did so, but nobody seemed to care to come forward as accuser, and so the work of mischief went on and on.

One afternoon the alarm bell rang out, calling the firemen to the rescue, and every man of them sprang forward in response to the call.

It was a terrible race between No. 3 and the Salem Boys as to which company should reach the fire first.

The boys were more nimble-footed, and reached the fire about one minute ahead of the others.

They also put on the first stream of water and run up the first ladder.

The building was soon wrapped in a sheet of flame, and several persons narrowly escaped death by burning.

Jack brought down a child that had been left asleep in one of the rooms.

"Uncle John is in his room!" screamed a woman. "He is sick and can't get out!"

Jack waited to hear no more.

He sprang up the ladder, climbed through the window in the face of a dense black column of smoke that was pouring through it, and disappeared from sight.

An awful suspense followed, and the people held their breath, as if to breathe would increase the terrible danger that threatened the young fireman.

The minutes seemed like hours to the Salem Boys, who trembled for their young leader.

Suddenly a yell of:

"There he is!" burst from the crowd.

The next moment he was seen at the window with the form of the sick man enveloped in a blanket so thoroughly that nothing of him was seen.

Jack came out of the window feet foremost, and caught the ladder with his left hand.

For a moment he had to stop to breathe a little fresh air.

His clothing was on fire in two places, but Billy Malone turned the water on him and extinguished the flames for the moment.

Then Jack began to descend.

Half way down he was met by two of his boys, who came up to his assistance.

But he never let go of his burden till he reached the ground, when another roar like the ocean burst from the multitude.

Old John Harper was a very rich and very eccentric old bachelor, who lived with a married niece in the house that was consumed.

He had been a confirmed invalid for many months, but like all very rich men hung on to life longer than his heirs liked to see.

When he was delivered to friends at the foot of the ladder he was unharmed, save being nearly frightened to death.

He was carried to the hotel, and cared for just as any other rich man would be under such circumstances, while the crowd gathered the young hero up on their shoulders and carried him in triumph up and down the street.

The rescue of old John Harper had the effect that was but natural under the circumstances.

The people were unsparing in their praise of the heroic young fireman.

All the papers gave him the same praise that had been given on former occasions.

The other firemen did their whole duty at this fire, but it seemed as if young Nelson selected the most daring and dangerous feats to perform himself. Tom Bussy met the chief of the fire department, and said:

"Jack carried off the honors again to-day."

"Yes. He is a little too quick for you fellows," replied the chief.

"I don't understand it."

"Well, I do."

"How is it?"

"Very easy."

"How?"

"While you fellows are thinking about doing a thing he goes to work to do it. That's the whole thing in a nutshell."

"He seems to have been born lucky," remarked Tom.

"Lucky! It's pluck and energy," said the chief.

"I'm not sure of that. I say, have you heard the stories they tell about him?"

"Oh, yes, everybody has heard them."

"What do you think?"

"Oh, I don't believe them—that's all."

"How did such things get started?"

"Some liar may have said something in a joke, and all the fools and gossips in town repeated it."

Tom winced, but said:

"He ought to set himself right before the public."

"Hasn't he denied every one of the stories?"

"Yes."

"Well, what more can he do?"

Tom didn't know.

"I think we ought to get a permit to kill a few who keep the stories in circulation. That would put a stop to it."

"I don't know that it would," and Tom laughed as he turned away.

In ten minutes he met Henry Wildey, and whispered:

"Henry, you have money enough to spend for revenge; I have not. Come with me and I'll put you in the way of getting satisfaction for your defeat."

Wildey went with him in quest of Jim Hicks, and in half an hour the three young firemen were in Tom's bachelor apartments talking over the random mutterings of old Mag Mullins.

"I want to hear her," said Henry, "and see what she says."

"Let's go down there to-night, then?" suggested Hicks.

It was agreed to, and Tom sent word to Ed Slaughter's wife that they would call that evening.

When they called they found Ed and his wife waiting for them, ready to have a jolly time of it.

They played cards, drank beer, and laughed and chatted with the utmost good humor.

Every time they drank beer they asked old Aunt Mag to have some.

The old lady was not averse to having a glass or two, and in the course of an hour or so Tom Bussy had succeeded in persuading her to drink three or four glasses.

Then they began talking about Jack's rescue of old John Harper, from the burning building only a day or two previous.

At the first mention of the name the old hag pricked up her ears and listened.

"So he has been at another fire, has he?"

"Yes, grandma," said Ed, "and he came near being burned up, too."

"Well—well, he'll burn after awhile. Jack Nelson can't escape the last fire that never goes out. When the dead shall arise to tell their story, then he'll go into everlasting fire! Fire is too good for such as he."

"What did he do, Aunt Mag?" Tom asked.

"Do! What did Jack do? Let the dead speak and you would know all."

"But the dead can't speak."

"No, more's the pity," and she looked at the glowing embers again as if to refresh her memory of the past.

"What did he do?"

"What did he do? Why, the deepest, blackest crime that ever mortal man heard of. He——"

Bang!

The house shook, and the old lady leaned back in her chair almost paralyzed with terror, while the four men sprang up and ran into the street.

As they reached the street another stone came, which struck Tom Bussy on the head and sent him rolling in the dust.

CHAPTER VI.

A FIREMAN WITH A BROKEN HEAD.

The stone struck Bussy with such force that not only the other three heard, but Mrs. Slaughter also, in the house.

She gave a shudder, believing that someone had been killed.

The other three saw him fall, and looked wildly around for a glimpse of his assailant.

But, as in the first case, no one was seen on either side of the street.

Two stones which had been thrown lay on the ground.

The one which struck down Tom Bussy was scarcely half the size of the one that had bombarded the side of the house. Yet it was as large as an ordinary cocoanut, and weighed several pounds.

"Tom is hurt!" exclaimed Jim, as Tom fell heavily to the ground.

Wildey turned also, but Ed Slaughter drew a revolver, which he had carried ever since the night the first stone was thrown, and ran up the street in quest of the unknown assailant.

Mrs. Slaughter rushed out of the house, and asked:

"Who is hurt?"

"Bussy," replied Hicks.

"Where's Ed?"

"He ran off up the street."

"Goodness! He'll be killed!"

"There's nobody there," said Hicks, and then he knelt by the side of Tom and tried to arouse him.

"Here, Wildey, help me carry him into the house."

Wilkey assisted him, and in a couple of minutes more Tom was lying on a lounge in the house, still unconscious from the blow on the head.

"Where's Ed?" Mrs. Slaughter asked again, an uneasy feeling tugging at her heart.

"He ran off up the street when Tom was hit, to see if he could find out the one who threw the stone," replied Wilkey, who was as uneasy as she was.

A moment later Ed came back, saying, as he entered the door:

"I couldn't find a living soul anywhere about the corner. How is Tom?—is he much hurt?"

"I am afraid he is," answered Jim. "He was hit on the head. Just see how he bleeds, and he is still unconscious."

"I guess I better go for the doctor," said Ed, turning toward the door again.

"No, no," said his wife, bounding toward him. "You must not go alone."

"I'll go with him," said Wilkey.

"Yes, go with him, Wilkey," urged Hicks, "for then his wife will not be uneasy while he is away."

The two men passed out together, and Tom Bussy was left in charge of his friend and fellow-fireman, still in an unconscious condition.

The doctor came back with them, and in a moment saw what the trouble was. It was a severe case. A portion of the skull had been broken, and pressed down on the brain.

He went back to his office for his surgical instruments, and when he returned he was accompanied by another physician.

Together they trepanned him—lifting the pressure from the brain—and instantly Tom became conscious.

"Where is the rascal!" he called out, in clear, determined tones.

"He got away, Tom," said Hicks.

"What's the matter with my head?"

"Keep quiet," said the doctor, holding a hand firmly on his shoulder. "You have been very badly hurt."

Tom looked up at him as if not fully understanding him, and asked:

"Who are you?"

"I am Dr. Kingsley."

"Ah! Yes. What hit me?"

"You must keep quiet, sir," said the doctor again, and then, turning to Ed, asked:

"Where does he live?"

"Up on Gould street. He has a room there, and takes his meals out."

"Then he ought to go to a hospital where he can receive proper attention, unless you can give it to him here."

After some consultation over the matter it was decided to leave it to Tom to say which he preferred.

"I'll go to the hospital," he said. "Ed can't afford to have anyone sick in his house."

"You are welcome for all that, Tom," said Ed.

"Yes, but I won't impose on you that way."

So an ambulance was sent for, and Tom was carried away to the hospital.

When the ambulance was driven off Ed Slaughter said to Jim Hicks:

"Wait a moment. I want to see you about this thing."

"Shall Wilkey wait, too?" Hicks asked, seeing that the other was about to leave.

"Yes, of course."

They went into the dining-room by themselves, where Ed turned to Hicks and remarked:

"There's a mystery about this thing which I want cleared up."

Hicks was astonished.

"I don't understand it myself, and I'd like to see it cleared up," he replied.

"I think you know something about it, and I want an explanation."

"What in blazes do you mean?"

"I mean just what I say."

"If you will tell me why you think I know something about it I may be able to catch on to what you mean."

"Now, look here, Hicks. You and Bussy came here the other night, and we talked about many things that none of us knew nothing about. But as soon as you or Tom began to quiz the old woman about Jack Nelson a big stone struck the house. To-night the same thing happened while you were quizzing her. Now, what I want to know is this: Does this thing have any connection with the story you fellows are trying to get from the old woman?"

"I'm blest if I know," replied Jim. "All I know about it is this—that Tom said she knew something bad about Jack which we wanted to get hold of. As to who threw the stones I know no more than you do."

"Then you fellows are trying to worm a secret out of the old woman, are you?"

"We were trying to get her to tell us," answered Hicks, in a confessional sort of way.

"Why didn't you tell me what you wanted to do?"

"Oh, we thought she would tell the whole of it if she had a chance to do so."

"Well, I don't think you have acted like gentlemen in the matter at all, and I am only sorry all three of you did not fare alike. If you had told me what you wanted to find out I might have been able to persuade the old woman to tell all she knew."

"I didn't know but what you understood the whole thing," said Wilkey, "or I would not have called, being an entire stranger to you."

"Yes, yes, it's all right as far as you are concerned," said Ed.

"I thought that you and Tom had talked the matter over before we came," remarked Hicks, as Ed looked inquiringly at him.

"So the blame rests upon Tom, then," said Ed, after a pause. "Well, he is punished enough for doing as he did, and I shall not say any more about it. But I want this thing to stop right here. My wife's grandmother is very old and childish, and talks a great deal in her way. I shall tell her to keep her mouth shut about Jack Nelson, or she'll get us all into trouble."

Hicks and Wilkey could not say anything to that, as they would not go so far as to tell him that they were trying to destroy the good name of Jack Nelson.

They finally took leave of Slaughter and his wife, and went back to their quarters, thinking all the way that their errand had resulted in a miserable failure.

"But the old woman knows of a black crime in which Nelson was engaged, that's certain," remarked Hicks.

"No doubt of that," assented Wilkey. "But how do you account for those stones being thrown just in time to break off her story?"

"Oh, I don't try to account for it. I just simply can't do it. I am all broke up over it."

"Well, I am going to get that story out of her if it costs me one thousand dollars."

"The deuce you say!"

"Yes. I don't intend to let it stop there. She has got to tell it to somebody, and I am going to hire somebody to worm it out of her."

"Can it be done?"

"I think so. Some old woman can get it out of her. I think I know one who can work it."

"Better get one of her neighbors, for then nothing will be suspected."

"Do you know one?"

"Yes."

"Go and see her, and give her one hundred dollars to get the secret out of her."

"Will you pay that much?"

"Yes—cheerfully."

"Then I will see her to-morrow night."

"Don't let the Slaughters know—they may suspect something wrong."

"All right—I'll keep dark."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FEMALE SPY.

The fact that Tom Bussy was in the hospital with a broken head was soon known to every fireman in Salem. He belonged to No. 3, and a score of the members of that company called on him during the day.

In the evening nearly the entire company visited him. The surgeons in charge were forced to refuse admittance to all save one or two friends whom he had asked to see.

The police investigated the matter, and utterly failed to find any clew to who threw the stones.

Slaughter said that he had no cause to suspect anyone, and, therefore, had no idea as to who the guilty parties were.

But Hicks had told a half dozen of his comrades about the old woman and her mysterious secret.

"The stone-throwing has stopped it twice, you say?" one asked.

"Yes."

"Well, who but Jack or some of his friends have any interest in suppressing this thing?"

"That's what I would like to know."

"The way to find out is to have a watch on the outside on the next visit. That's as easy as catching a flea."

"Slaughter forbids any more visits, and has told the old woman not to open her mouth again except to eat or sing."

"The deuce he has!"

"Yes, so you see it is easier to catch the flea."

"We can set a watch on Jack to see if he goes down that way."

"Yes, and a watch on the house."

Hicks hired two detectives—one to watch Ed Slaughter's house, and the other to keep on the trail of Jack Nelson.

They went to work at once, and lost no time.

Hicks paid a stealthy visit in the evening to a neighbor of the Slaughters, one with whom they were on intimate terms.

He told her a plausible story about the object of the visit, and then said:

"She will not give the whole story to us. We are very anxious to get hold of the real truth of the matter, and if you can and will worm the secret out of her we will pay you one hundred dollars in gold."

That settled it.

The woman loved money above everything else in this world, and would do anything not actually degrading to get it.

"I'll do it," she said.

"When shall I call again?" Jim asked.

"Don't call any more. We would be suspected, because you have never called on us before. I'll run in to see them in a

day or two, and if I get anything out of her will meet you somewhere else."

"Send me a note where to meet you," said Jim, "and I'll be on hand. Here is my address," and he handed her his card and left the house.

"If Mrs. Dell can't get the secret out of her nobody can," commented Jim, as he made his way uptown toward his bachelor quarters.

Mrs. Dell was the name of the lady who was to find out the secret about Jack Nelson for those firemen who were anxious to ruin the daring young hero's reputation in order to force him out of the fire department.

She was a very avaricious woman, but yet with a good reputation among her neighbors. The Slaughters had known her a long time—before their marriage—and liked her very much as a neighbor. She had often dropped in and spent an hour with them.

The next day, in the afternoon, she dropped in, and found the old lady quite ill in bed.

The excitement of the last visit of Tom Bussy and his companions had been too much for her.

Mrs. Slaughter told her all about what had happened, but did not say a word about Jack Nelson. Ed had warned both her and the old woman about doing so.

"Who do you think threw the stones?" she asked.

"Oh, we have no idea," replied Mrs. Slaughter.

"I heard that Jack Nelson and some of his friends——"

"Oh, I don't believe Jack would do such a thing, though I have never even seen him," said Mrs. Slaughter, interrupting her.

"I was surprised myself when I heard of it. They say that he has been mixed up in some bad work over in Mayfield."

"Yes, I heard so, too, but that is none of our business."

"No. Strange that people will talk so about one who has so often risked his life to save others."

"Yes," and Mrs. Slaughter looked as if she would prefer to drop the subject.

Mrs. Dell returned to her home fully convinced that if she succeeded in worming the secret out of the old lady she would have to use considerable diplomacy in doing so.

But she went bravely to work. She was not the woman to give anything up when once she started in pursuit of it.

The second time she called she found the old lady seated in her old armchair before the fire, with her knitting in her hand.

"You are up, are you, Aunt Mag?" she exclaimed on entering the room.

"Yes, I'm up," she said. "I am poorly, though. I ought to be in bed."

"Why, Aunt Mag, you look as well as at any time in ten years."

The old lady looked up at her in a surprised sort of way, as if the remark was something she had not heard for years.

She was one of those kind of old people who delighted in imagining themselves as being afflicted with not less than four-and-twenty different kinds of ailments at the same time.

Yet she was as susceptible of flattery at seventy-five as she had been at twenty years of age.

Mrs. Dell knew that peculiarity of female weakness, and said:

"It is astonishing how some people can keep up in their old age. Some people grow old before their time, and look to be one hundred when they are but sixty. With all your ill-health, Aunt Mag, you look ten or fifteen years younger than you really are. If my old age would serve me no worse, I would not fear it in the least."

The old lady smiled.

The flattery had found lodgment in her breast, and a warm feeling toward Mrs. Dell at once sprang up in her heart.

Her knitting dropped in her lap, and she gazed at the glowing coals in the grate as if memory was wandering back to the long, long ago, when flattery from beaux and lovers had seemed so sweet to her.

Mrs. Slaughter was busy with her household work in another part of the house, and so the visitor and the old lady were left to entertain each other.

That was just what Mrs. Dell desired. In fact, she asked, as she noticed the old lady gazing at the glowing coals.

"I am thinking of the time when I was young like you and Elsie," she said.

"Oh, I am not young any more," said Mrs. Dell. "I am in my forties now, you know."

"Forty is young—the very prime of life," returned the old lady. "I was as young at forty or fifty as I was at twenty or thirty. I was sixty ere I began to feel old."

"And yet you do not look a whit over sixty now. But it must be very pleasant to sit and dream over the past. You have seen so much in your day, both good and bad, that you have plenty to think about. Which leaves the most lasting impression on your mind, Aunt Mag—the good or evil you have seen?"

The old lady thought over her answer nearly a minute ere she spoke:

"The evil—I think—if it carries crime with it. I don't think I shall ever forget the Nelson affair. It seems to prey upon my mind because it has gone on unpunished ever so long—because the world does not know of it."

"Why, what was that, Aunt Mag? I never heard anything of that. Why don't you tell the officers of the law if you know of a wrong that has been done?"

"Yes, yes! I ought to do that—I ought to do that!" and she rocked herself to and fro several times, as if in some sort of mental distress or emotion.

Mrs. Dell actually suffered in her suspense, so eager was she to hear the few words of a secret that would drop one hundred dollars into her lap.

"You knew the Nelsons and all that was done, did you not?" she asked.

"Yes, I know all," she answered. "It's a black crime—a shame that one child should be robbed of his inheritance at the same time that a cruel murder robbed another of his life. I shall never forget the night when they——"

Bang!

The house shook, and Mrs. Dell and Mrs. Slaughter screamed at the top of their voices, and ran out into the street, while the old lady sank back in her capacious armchair with a ghastly look on her wrinkled old face.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE THIRD FAILURE AND ANOTHER FIRE.

To say that the women were frightened would be but a mild expression.

They were panicstricken.

It was in the middle of the day, when the sun was shining brightly, and men, women, and children were passing to and fro along the street.

The stone was as large as a boy's head, and had struck the house with such force as to jar it to its foundation.

The neighbors heard it in their houses, and ran out to see about it. Some boys were playing in the street.

They heard the blow and saw the stone roll on the ground after it struck the house, but did not see anybody hurl it—

nor anyone who was really able to throw such a heavy missile.

A crowd soon collected, and a boy ran across town to the ship where Ed Slaughter was employed to tell him about it.

He came home immediately and asked his wife who had been there.

"No one but Mrs. Dell," she said. "She was talking to grandma in the front room while I was working in the dining-room, and the first thing I knew the shock came as if the house was coming down about our heads."

"The old woman was talking about Jack Nelson," he said. "I told her to keep her mouth shut about that. If this thing happens again I'll bundle her off to the poorhouse. I'm not going to have my house battered down just because a garrulous old woman can't keep her mouth shut."

He spoke harshly, angrily, and Elsie burst into tears.

Ed went into the old lady's room, and found her in bed, completely prostrated.

"You are bound to tell your secret or have the house knocked down about our heads, are you?" he said. "I warned you the other day. Now, if this thing occurs again you'll go to the poorhouse. I don't care to have my home knocked over just because you can't hold your tongue."

The old lady was too much prostrated to really understand what he said. She was quite superstitious, and now a terrible fear had suddenly come upon her.

After awhile Ed went to his wife, whom he dearly loved, and putting an arm around her neck in his old loving way, said:

"I did not mean to speak harshly to you, Elsie. I was angry, but not with you. Hereafter we must not let our visitors see grandma. She will get us into trouble with her talking if we don't guard her that way."

"I never thought she would say a word more after what you said to her the other day, and I never dreamed that anybody would dare stone the house in broad daylight."

"Of course not. But look out hereafter, and don't let anyone have a chance to talk to her. She is frightened nearly to death now."

"Poor old soul! I am sorry for her. She didn't mean any harm."

"No, but a loose tongue can make as much mischief in a neighborhood as any mad dog can."

He went back to his work, and the news went all over that part of the town that the Slaughter cottage had again been stoned in mid-day, and no one could find out the perpetrators of the outrage.

A dozen neighbors visited Mrs. Dell to hear what she had to say about it. She held regular levees every day for a week, but was shrewd enough not to say a word about Jack Nelson.

Hicks and Wildey had warned her not to mention the name to anyone. They were the worst puzzled men in the town. That the ponderous stones should strike the house just as the old woman was on the eve of revealing the terrible secret they were in search of staggered them.

"I don't understand it at all," said Hicks, shaking his head.

"Nor do I," returned Wildey, "but I am sure that we'll get at the bottom of it after awhile. There's somebody around there all the time to watch the old woman and throw a stone to give her a nervous start, and thus break up the conversation. A good detective will unearth all that."

"Yes, I hope so. I say, Wildey, I've just heard that old Harper gave Jack a gold medal to-day and a thousand dollars in gold for saving his life."

"I heard so this afternoon," returned Wildey. "I can't blame him for that, as Jack did save his life."

"Yes, of course, but some other fireman would have done the same thing had he not got in ahead of him."

"No doubt of it, but he gets the credit, and we honest firemen have to suffer in comparison with him."

A day or two later Hicks met Mrs. Dell by appointment, to hear her report of her two attempts to get at the old lady's secret.

"She had begun to tell me," she said, "when a stone came against the house with such force as to nearly frighten my life out of me. I ran home and have not been back there since."

"You need not go back, Mrs. Dell. Here's ten dollars for your trouble. We have given up the idea of trying to get the secret out of her."

Mrs. Dell took the ten dollars, and mentally resolved to get that secret out of old Mag Mullins, if it sent a whole rock quarry flying through the air.

A few nights later the slumbers of the good people of Salem were broken by the ringing of the great fire-bell.

Firemen sprang out of their beds and dressed faster than they did before in their lives, and hastened to their respective company quarters.

The whole south end of Salem was lit up by the conflagration, and as the fire companies went flying along the streets windows were raised, and night-capped heads peered out at the red glare.

Away they went, the Salem Boys at the top of their speed, cheered on by such of the young people who had come from their beds to witness the fire.

As they turned into another street they came abreast of No. 3, and the race became fast and furious.

The latter company's quarters were at least a half-mile nearer the fire than the Salem Boys, yet the boys were now abreast of them in the race.

"Fly, boys, fly!" called Jack through his trumpet.

"Shove ahead, men!" sung out the foreman of No. 3.

But it was impossible to "shove ahead" of those nimble-footed boys, and so they reached the fire at the same instant.

Jack secured the best position, and the others rushed forward to oust him, and in a moment a terrible hand-to-hand struggle was going on.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW THE BOY VOLUNTEERS WHIPPED THE FIGHT.

It required but a small spark to start the explosion.

Being on the inside nearest the burning building, Jack had the quick perception to see which was the most advantageous position, and he promptly halted his engine on the spot.

"On with the water, quick!" he yelled through his trumpet.

"Out of the way there!" yelled Foreman Wright, of No. 3.

But the Salem Boys were not getting in or out of anybody's way just then, and went on with their work.

In another moment No. 3 ran against their engine with a savage force that knocked it out of position.

While the Salem Boys' engine was not injured in the least, the other one was badly damaged, the fore axle snapping in twain at the hub of the wheels.

The engine dropped, and came near capsizing.

Foreman Wright turned angrily on Jack, and yelled at him:

"Why didn't you get out of the way when you were told to?"

"Because nobody told me to."

"I told you to!"

"But you are nobody!"

Wright struck him with his trumpet, knocking him down.

But he was on his feet in a moment, and the next moment Wright went down with a broken head.

Jack was a hard hitter, and the next three men who came at him were downed in quick succession.

Then the Salem Boys sprang forward to the assistance of their leader, and in a few minutes a hand-to-hand battle was going on.

Of course, it was expected that the stalwart members of No. 3 would clean out the boys in a few minutes.

But they did not.

On the contrary the boys downed them as fast as they came to them, to the amazement of both firemen and spectators.

The secret was soon out.

They had been expecting a fight for a month past, and so every boy carried a neat little slung-shot in his pocket to be handy when wanted.

No. 3 retired from the field with broken heads, and the Salem Boys turned their attention to the fire.

The flames had gained such headway during the fight that it was a waste of water and time to play on them.

Nobody lived in the building, hence no lives were at stake. But other buildings were in danger. The boys deluged the houses on either side, and managed to prevent the spread of the flames.

But it was tedious work, and when daylight came they were still at work on the glowing coals.

They never left the spot till the last spark was extinguished, and then they marched back to their headquarters, only to find themselves arrested by officers of the law for using slung-shots on the heads of No. 3.

The wildest excitement ensued immediately after the arrests. Everybody in the town was up in arms, so to speak, in defense of the boys.

They were carried into court at ten o'clock.

Foreman Wright was in the hospital with a cracked skull and could not appear. But Jack proved by a score of witnesses that Wright had struck the first blow, knocking him down.

"Then I got up and knocked him down," said Jack, "and then the whole gang came at me. It was lively, but we cleaned 'em out."

"But how about those slung-shots?" the justice asked.

"Oh, we had 'em for a month. We knew we'd have use for 'em some day, and so we did."

"But don't you know it is unlawful for anyone to carry a slung-shot concealed about his person?"

"Yes, your honor, and we also knew that No. 3 intended to give us an unlawful thrashing some time or other, and we knew that the law could not prevent 'em from doing so."

"But the law would punish them if they did," said the justice.

"True, your honor, but we would have had the thrashing all the same. We prefer to pay for thrashing them than have 'em pay for thrashing us."

The judge smiled and said:

"That is good common sense, Mr. Nelson, but very poor law. You have violated the law knowingly, for which each one of you is fined one dollar, and your slung-shots, now in the hands of the clerk of the court, are forfeited."

"Will your honor allow me to pay the fine for all of them?" an old man asked.

The judge looked up, and saw an old man leaning on a cane, his thin, pale face and white hair in strange contrast with the ruddy-faced, red-shirted boys in the courtroom.

"Certainly, Mr. Harper," replied the judge. "Step up to the clerk's desk, and pay one dollar for each member of the Salem Boy's Fire Company."

The boys broke into a wild cheer as the white-haired old man who had been rescued from certain death by their young leader stepped forward and paid the fines.

"Silence in court!" roared a deputy sheriff.

But the boys yelled again and again, and not until the judge had repeatedly rapped for order did they cease.

Then the justice proceeded to give the members of No. 3 a lecture on their conduct, saying they had received the punishment that they deserved, and that they ought to be ashamed of themselves for being jealous of a company of boys.

Though the boys were fined and reprimanded, they felt that they had won the fight, and hundreds of their friends shook hands with them when they came out of the court-room.

The members of No. 3 were mad beyond control. Some of them talked ugly, and swore that hereafter they would go to fires with revolvers in their pockets.

"But where will you be if the boys do the same thing?" a gentleman asked.

"We'll be right there. Where would they have been had we been supplied with slung-shots?"

"You had better shake hands and be friends," suggested a gentleman standing by. "You have no just quarrel with them."

"What! Not when our heads have been broken with slung-shot?"

"Oh, you forget that the court has decided that you deserved that," and the citizen laughed as he made the remark, whereat the fireman was very wroth.

That night the Salem Boys held a reception at their engine hall, where hundreds of their friends called to congratulate them on their victory over No. 3.

The fight only intensified the ill-feeling that existed between the Salem Boys and the older firemen, and had anyone asked either side as to the origin of the trouble no one could have answered the query.

In the hospital Foreman Wright talked about prosecuting Jack for breaking his head.

"Don't mention it," said his lawyer. "Jack can put you to considerable trouble and expense if he decides to push the law on you for striking him over the head with your trumpet—which started the row. My advice to you is to drop it and say no more about it."

CHAPTER X.

THE CONSPIRATORS AT WORK.

The evening following the incidents related in the previous chapter found Henry Wildey and Jim Hicks with two detectives, closeted in a room. They were engaged in earnest conversation over the young hero of the fire department of the town.

Jim Hicks was fond of turmoil and intrigue. He had no personal quarrel with Jack Nelson. His own company hated the young hero, and that was enough for him to know.

But the case was different with Wildey.

His was a personal quarrel. Jack Nelson had thrashed him on the public street, and he had sworn to ruin him at any cost. He had hired two detectives to trail him—one to relieve the other—and, if possible, to get at the secret which old Mag Mullins held.

They were working for pay at so much a week, with the promise of a big bonus if they succeeded in bringing down the game.

"I don't know how we are going to get at that old woman's secret," said Nick Bell, one of the detectives. "She is too old to go out on the street alone, and I understand that Ed's wife has positive orders from him not to let any visitors get at her."

"Yes—I heard as much myself," said Hicks.

"So you see," continued Nick, "what we have to contend against?"

"I hired you to get over or around all such obstacles," said Wildey, "and it's in your line, you know."

"Yes—and we'll do our best. But look here, Wildey. Do you have any idea where those big stones came from?"

"No, not the least idea."

"Well, there's more of a mystery about that than you think. I don't believe any man threw them."

"The deuce you don't!"

"No, I don't!"

"It was a woman, then, eh?"

"I didn't say so."

The other three stared at Bell in amazement.

"Was it a horse, mule or dog?" Wildey asked.

"Oh, maybe the stones just jumped up against the house by themselves."

The others burst into a loud laugh.

"I say, Bell," said Hicks, "you are away off. What have you been drinking to-day?"

"Water, straight," replied Bell. "You fellows have such thick skulls that it takes an idea a week to get through to your brain. In about a year you will begin to develop just a little sense and see things differently."

"What in thunder are you driving at, anyhow?" Hicks asked.

"I am trying to make you fellows understand that no human agency threw those stones against——"

Again a roar of laughter came from the other three.

But Bell remained as quiet as an undertaker.

"Have you fellows got through with your laugh?" he asked.

They laughed again, and Hicks said, wiping his eyes:

"Don't make me laugh any more."

"Poor fellow," remarked Bell, sarcastically. "Your little brain can't stand too much at once."

"Do you want to butt heads with me?" Hicks asked.

"No. I don't care to beat my brains out against an empty bone box."

"Bone box is good," said Hicks, laughing good-naturedly. "Go on with your theory, and tell us what it is?"

"I won't do it, but I'll take you down there some night, and let you see for yourself what it is. Just give me authority to pay for that secret, and I'll see if we can't get at it."

"I am willing to pay for it, but I want to know how the money goes," said Wildey.

"Of course. I think that either Ed Slaughter or his wife, if approached in the right way, would get the secret for us."

Wildey scratched his head reflectively for a moment or two, and remarked:

"Yes. I never thought of that. Has Mrs. Dell given it up?"

"I think she has. She received such a fright the other day that I don't believe any amount of money could get her to attempt it again."

"Well, you'll have to be very careful how you approach Slaughter. I think that if he thought a man was trying to bribe him he'd knock him down without a moment's hesitation."

"I am not so sure of that," said Hicks. "He is a great friend of Tom Bussy's, and if he could be made to believe that Jack Nelson was at the bottom of Tom's broken head, he'd do anything to avenge him."

"Yet he'd break the head of the man who offered him money to do so."

"I am not so sure of that, either. Ed works hard for his living, and doesn't make a very good living, either. His wife is fond of dress and company, and has to economize in numberless little ways to save money enough to buy such dresses as she has."

"You seem to know a great deal about them," remarked Wildey.

"Yes—Mrs. Dell posted me about them."

"Couldn't Mrs. Dell work the racket with Mrs. Slaughter?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Then see her again."

The conference broke up at a late hour, and the men went in the direction of their homes.

On his way up the street Hicks met Jack Nelson, who was escorting Myrtis Banning home from a party.

They both recognized him and spoke to him, and then passed on.

"The young rascal!" hissed Hicks, as he stopped and looked back at him. "He has the favor of all the pretty girls in town because of his daring and good looks. That's the girl that set him on Wildey. Hanged if I don't follow them just to see if they do go straight to her home," and he turned and shadowed them through a dozen blocks till they reached the home of the young girl.

He saw them part at the door, and actually heard the sweet voice of Myrtis say:

"Good-night, Jack. I am ever so much obliged to you for the pleasures of this evening."

"Do you know, Myrtis," said Jack, "that I enjoy myself better with you than with any other girl in town?"

"Is that so? Well, I am so glad to hear it! I shall always try to make you enjoy yourself whenever you call."

Thus they parted, and Jack turned to leave.

As he walked away he caught sight of the shadow and made direct for him.

Not wishing to be discovered, Hicks took to his heels.

Jack bounded after him like a deer, and the race up the street at a late hour attracted the attention of the policeman on that beat.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SHADOW CAUGHT.

When Jack saw the policeman, he called out lustily:

"Stop that man!"

That was enough.

The officer, thinking him a burglar or pickpocket, or something equally bad, bounded after him at the top of his speed.

That made Hick's hair stand on end!

He didn't want to be caught and exposed, and yet, unless he outran the officer, he would have to surrender and face the music.

Half a dozen blocks away another policeman joined in the chase—a hot-headed, burly fellow, who called out:

"Stop now, or I'll fire!"

"Good Lord!"

Hicks fairly flew along the street.

Crack went a revolver, and a bullet whistled uncomfortably close to Hicks' head.

"Halt, I say, or down you go!" called the officer.

"Don't shoot!" cried Hicks, seeing that his life would probably pay the penalty if he did not stop.

The two officers came up to him, almost out of breath, and seized him.

"Who are you?" one of them asked.

"My name is Hicks."

"What have you been doing?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, yes—that's what they all say."

Just then Jack came up.

"There's a man who knows me," said Hicks, turning to Jack.

"Do you know this man?" the officer asked.

"Why, hello, Hicks!" exclaimed Jack, on recognizing the man. "Yes, I know him. He belongs to No. 3 fire company, and is a good fireman."

"What's he been up to?"

"Hanged if I know," replied Jack. "I thought I saw somebody shadowing me as I was escorting a young lady home from a party. When I left her at her door I made for the shadow, and he took to his heels."

"Is this the man?"

"Yes. And now, Hicks, what's your little racket?"

"Blow my buttons off if I haven't a great mind to club his head off for making me run half a mile to catch him!" growled one of the officers.

"Yes," said the other. "Club him anyway, for spite!"

"I am not to blame for your running after me," said Hicks. "Jack Nelson told you to stop me, and by that you took me for a thief or something else bad, and gave chase."

"So you are Jack Nelson, are you?" one asked, turning to Jack.

"Yes, that's my name."

"Well, what are you going to do about this?"

"I am going to apologize to you for the trouble I gave you, and then ask him to explain why he was shadowing me."

"I wasn't shadowing you," said Hicks.

"But you were," replied Jack, firmly. "I met you half a mile away from the spot where I saw you the second time. You followed us. If you don't explain that to my satisfaction I'll thrash you right here, or else you'll give me a good drubbing."

"I guess I'll give you the drubbing," said Hicks, who was confident that the officers would not permit a fight."

"Oh, you will, eh? Officers, please go back to your posts and leave us alone just five minutes!"

"Oh, we can't permit a fight, you know," said the officers.

"But you want to have him thrashed, and so do I, and if you will just give me a chance I'll raise him out of his boots."

"No scrub like you can do that," remarked Hicks.

No sooner had the words escaped his lips than down he went.

Jack had dealt him one between the eyes.

He saw more stars than ever before in all his life.

"You should not have done that," remarked the officer nearest him.

"Don't say a word," said Jack, softly, "and we'll have some fun."

Hicks arose and glared at the young hero.

"Did you hit me?" he asked.

"No," said Jack. "It was the cat."

The officers chuckled.

Hicks aimed a blow at Jack in which he threw all his strength.

He was much heavier and stronger than Jack, but the young hero was well up in the science of sparring.

Nimble parrying the blow, he planted another on Hick's eye and laid him out again at full length on his back.

"Now you didn't see that, you know," said Jack, chuckling, "and you have your satisfaction. He won't dare say a word, for fear of giving himself dead away."

The officers chuckled, and understood the situation at a glance. They had no objections to having the other man punished for the race he had given them.

Hicks came up the third time and reached for his revolver. Then the officers grabbed him.

"No shooting," said one.

"I'll kill 'im!" hissed Hicks.

"Maybe I'll kill you!" said Jack. "Stand him off there, officer, and get out of the way."

"Send him away if you don't want to see murder right here." Jack chuckled.

"Send us both away—in the same direction," he said.

"You go on up the street, Nelson," said the officer, turning to Jack.

"All right. Send him down the street. He'll come round the block and we'll meet on the corner. I'll wait for you there, Jim Hicks."

Jack turned away and walked briskly toward the corner, and in a few moments had disappeared round the corner.

"Now you be off!" the officer said to Hicks, and he went away in the opposite direction.

Jack stopped on the corner to see if Hicks would meet him there.

In a few minutes he was surprised to see a dark form creeping toward him under the shadow of the houses.

He was unable to make out whether it was Hicks or not.

But he had asked the latter to meet him there, and he was not the man to retreat from his own challenge.

Instead of standing there, where he would be a fair target for his enemy, he resolved to meet him in the shadows on an equality. The next moment he was creeping forward to meet the dark form of the creeping foe.

CHAPTER XII.

THE BATTLE IN THE DARK.

As the two men crept forward under the dark shadows of the buildings, they could hear their own hearts beat.

But the bitter hate that moved them made them reckless of the danger that menaced them.

Hicks, smarting under the stinging blows he had received,

was utterly reckless, and was not in a frame of mind to be cool and cautious.

On the contrary, Jack was naturally cool in the presence of danger.

On, on they crept in the dark shadows, and in a little while they were within ten feet of each other.

Jack then squeezed himself behind a column to wait for his enemy.

Hicks had lost sight of him, and stopped to look for him. Jack understood the delay, and waited in patience for him.

By and by, as if half suspicious that Jack had given him the slip and left the locality, Hicks moved forward right up to the column, which he passed without seeing Jack.

Jack stepped out, leveled his revolver at him, and called out to him, sternly:

"Drop it!"

Hicks was almost paralyzed.

He wheeled round, to find the muzzle of Jack's revolver within two feet of his breast.

"Drop it!"

Down went the revolver on the stone pavement.

"Back off a few paces.

"Now I'll give you the thrashing you deserve," said Jack, making a dash for the fireman.

Being the stronger of the two, Hicks strove to get him in his grasp. Jack saw his game, and rained blow after blow on his face, as he leaped nimbly about to avoid being caught.

In a few minutes he found that Hicks was groping about like a blind man.

Both eyes were closed.

"Enough!" called the villain at last, in tones that left no doubt on our hero's mind that death was almost preferable to surrender.

"All right," replied Jack. "I have no grudge against you. Can I do anything for you?"

Hicks was amazed.

He stood like one too confused to do anything.

"Your eyes are closed," said Jack. "You can't find your way home. I'll lead you wherever you wish to go, and say nothing about what has occurred."

"Take me to Mackin's drug store. But give me my weapon first," said Hicks.

"Oh, no! I'll send you your gun by messenger to-morrow. You know very well that you would think me the greatest fool that ever lived were I to give you your gun now. I don't want to kill you, nor do I care to be wiped out myself."

Jack took the weapon and put it in his pocket.

Then he locked arms with him and led him two blocks away to Mackin's drug store.

A young doctor, who was a friend of Hicks', lived upstairs over the drug store, and after the drug clerk had been called up, the doctor was called down.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the doctor, "what's the matter with you, Hicks?"

"I am knocked blind," said Hicks, "and want you to open my eyes just as quick as you can."

"You had better come upstairs to my rooms, then," said the doctor.

Jack carried, or rather led him up the stairs, where he said:

"I'll leave you with the doctor now."

"Yes—thank you, Jack. Leave my gun with him, too."

"All right; here it is, doctor. If it hadn't been for me he'd have killed a man to-night. He is a bad citizen when he gets mad."

The doctor took the weapon and laid it away, and then set himself to work to apply leeches to the swollen eyelids of the fireman.

In a couple of hours Hicks could see a little out of both eyes.

"How did this happen, Jim?" the doctor asked.

"A fight," was the reply.

"With whom?"

"That's a secret. Only four of us know it. We are pledged to secrecy."

"That's queer."

"Not at all. We don't want the papers to get hold of it."

"Nor the police?"

"No."

"Was the other fellow hurt?"

"I'm afraid he's killed."

"Good Lord, is that so?"

"Yes."

"Then it may all come out at last?"

"Yes, if he comes to before he dies."

The doctor did not ask any more.

He knew it would be of no use.

Hicks remained in the doctor's rooms all the next day, and on the following evening repaired to his own quarters.

He had not been ten minutes in his room when Henry Wildey called.

"Saints and sinners!" exclaimed Wildey, on seeing the terribly bruised face of the fireman, "what have you been up to, Hicks?"

"I've been to the front," was the reply.

"Yes, and was knocked to the rear in about one minute, were you not?"

"Hardly. It took 'em about ten minutes, I think," was the quiet reply.

"Who were they?"

"We have agreed to keep everything quiet till we can have another battle."

"Ah, you haven't decided it yet?"

"No. We want a supply of coffins for the next meeting."

Wildey was perfectly wild with suppressed excitement.

"Were the Salem Boys engaged in it?" he asked.

"I won't break the pledge of perfect silence on the subject," he said.

"Well, hang me if this isn't the strangest thing I ever heard of in all my life! Here's a man nearly murdered who won't tell anything about his assailants."

"Oh, you will know all about it when the funerals take place."

"Was anyone killed?"

"No, but there will be when we meet again."

Wildey paced the room and looked at the bruised and battered face of the young man, as if he would fain draw the information from him by main force. He was unused to such suspense, and could ill put up with it.

"Just look here now, Jim," he cried, "you have no right to keep this thing a secret from me. We are working together for a common object, and——"

"But this is a private, personal matter with which you have nothing to do," said Hicks.

Wildey took up his hat and left the room, too much excited to stay any longer. He made direct for the engine house of No. 3, where he found a score of firemen congregated.

There he told them of the condition in which he had left Hicks, and made the matter worse by saying, boldly:

"And he is so much intimidated that he dares not reveal the names of his assailants."

The firemen were greatly excited, and in less than a half hour over a score of them were on their way in a body to visit Jim Hicks.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PUZZLE OF THE FIREMEN.

Jim was surprised when he saw so many of his brother firemen come into his room.

Foreman Wright, who had been out of the hospital only two days, was the first to speak to him.

"How did this happen, Jim?" he asked.

"I had a fight."

"With whom?"

"That's my business."

"Have we no interest in it?"

"Not in the least."

"Won't you tell us who it was you fought with?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I am pledged not to do so. The battle is still on."

The firemen were as much excited over it as Wildey had been, and fired questions at him by the score.

But he would not answer any of them, nor would he admit that any of the Salem Boys had anything to do with it.

They went away at a late hour, more puzzled than ever they had been before in their lives.

Of course, no secret could be kept under such circumstances, and the next day the report was all over the town that Jim Hicks, one of the members of No. 3, had been attacked and brutally beaten.

Every one of the old firemen who repeated the story did so in such a way as to leave the impression that the Salem Boys firemen were the assailants.

Before night came half a hundred men had dropped in to see Jack, and ask him about the affair.

"Does Jim say that any of our boys attacked him?" he asked.

"No, but it's the general impression that they did."

"Well, I'll parade our boys to-night and call the roll, and put the question to them."

"There's no use in doing that," said his employer. "If Jim will not say who they are, why should you bother about it?"

"I give myself very little bother about it," replied Jack. "But if anybody wants to see whether any of our boys have been in a fight, he can find out by seeing them at our engine-house to-night."

Such conflicting rumors flew about town that the two policemen who had met the two firemen on the night of the fight were amazed at what they heard. They knew that Jack had knocked Hicks down twice, but did not dream that they had met again.

"If they had," whispered one to the other, "there would have been more trouble."

"But I understand that Jack actually led him to the drug store, and gave him in charge of the physician," said the other.

"Oh, that can't be."

"But it's what I hear."

"I'll ask Mackin about it. I know him."

The officer called on Mackin, who told him that Jack did bring him there, but that neither one would tell anything about what had happened.

"Then Jack fixed him up that way," observed the officer, as he walked away.

That evening he called on Jack, and asked him about it.

"Are you going to arrest us?" Nelson asked.

"Oh, no, but having knowledge of the first meeting, I am naturally anxious to know all about the second."

"You won't give it away?"

"No."

"Well, he came round that corner. I made him drop his gun, and then we had it out right there. I am the chicken that did the mischief. When he cried enough I led him, blind as a bat, to the drug store, and left him there. We agreed to say nothing about it."

"Well, I'm blest!" exclaimed the officer, in amazement, after he had heard the whole story.

"It's funny, isn't it?"

"I should say so."

The officer went back and told his comrade what he had learned of the affair.

In the meantime, Nick Bell, the detective, had been to see Mrs. Dell to make her an offer to try to bribe Mrs. Slaughter to get the secret out of her grandmother.

Mrs. Dell listened to all he said, and then remarked:

"I think that if I had the money to show her she would jump at it like a cat pouncing on a mouse."

"I'll bring you the money this evening—one hundred dollars," said Bell.

"Very well; and I'll see her to-morrow morning. If she does not take it I'll return it to you."

"Yes, and if she gets the secret you can have the like amount for yourself."

"Of course—that's understood."

That evening the money was put into her hands by the detective.

The next day she sent over for Mrs. Slaughter, who came in a few minutes later.

"Look here, Elsie," said Mrs. Dell, "you know that certain men are quite anxious to get hold of that secret your grandmother holds."

"Yes, I do."

"Well, do you know what it is?"

"No, I don't. Why do you ask?"

"Because, if you do, you can get one hundred dollars of good money for it."

"What?"

"You can get one hundred dollars for that little bit of gossip, and if I were you I'd get it or die. I wouldn't let that much money slip through my hands for all the old women that ever lived."

Mrs. Slaughter looked upon one hundred dollars as a fortune.

She had probably never seen that much money in all her life at one time.

"Who'll give me that much for the secret?" she asked.

"The money has been placed in my hands for you," said Mrs. Dell, and she showed her the roll of bills.

Elsie's eyes opened wide as she gazed at the money.

"Oh, I'll get it out of her if I die for it," she exclaimed, springing up and starting to leave the house.

"You must be careful and not let her or Ed suspect what you are up to," said Mrs. Dell.

"Oh, I'll be cautious enough."

"When will you get it?"

"Some time to-morrow when Ed is away at work."

That evening Bell was told the result of the negotiation with Ed Slaughter's wife, and he immediately informed Wildey and the other detective.

"Let the women work it," said Wildey, "and then call on Mrs. Dell for the story."

Two days later Bell called and found the fair widow so nervous she could scarcely speak.

"Oh, sir, such dreadful things have happened since you were here," she said, wringing her hands. "I don't know what to think about it."

"Well, tell me all about it," said Bell, "and then I may perhaps be able to tell you what to think about it."

"Elsie said she would get the secret from her grandmother," she continued, "and went to work at it to-day. She led the old lady on to talking about the case. Just as she was about to tell of some terrible crime that had been committed by Jack Nelson in Mayfield, a stone as large as your head crashed against the house with such force as to break the outside boards, and knock the plastering from the wall on the inside."

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated the detective, "is that true?"

"Yes, every word of it," replied the lady, "and both women

were so prostrated with fear that neither one could be induced to talk about Jack Nelson again."

The detective was too much surprised to make any reply to what had been said for some minutes after Mrs. Dell had finished her story.

"What do you think about it?" she asked.

"Why, that somebody threw the stone, of course."

"But there was no one in the street at the time, for I was at my window when the stone struck the house. I saw it roll on the ground, but there was nobody on the block at that moment. Of that I am quite positive."

"It's very strange."

"Yes, indeed."

"Do you give it up?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I'll see you again in a day or two."

And Bell left the house.

That evening Ed Slaughter vowed he would send the old woman to the poorhouse.

Elsie told Mrs. Dell about it.

She sent word to Bell.

Bell told Wildey and the others.

"Let him do so. We must contrive to abduct her and keep her in our power till we get the secret out of her."

"Yes, that's so. I'll see Ed, ascertain if he is really going to send her away, and suggest the Old Woman's Home."

"Do so."

That evening he called on Ed.

"Yes, I am going to send her away as soon as I can get time to attend to it."

"Why not send her to the Old Woman's Home? It wouldn't look quite so bad for you there."

"But can she get in there?"

"I think I can get a permit for her to enter there, as I have a brother who is one of the physicians of the Home."

"Get one, then. I am bound to get her out of my house."

"Well, I'll see my brother to-morrow and tell him about the case. I am quite sure that he can get me a permit for her to enter."

"If you get it you will place me under great obligations," said Slaughter, "as I would not like to send her to the poorhouse if it can be avoided. But rather than keep her here I would do so. If she causes the poorhouse to be knocked down, all right. The county is better able to stand that than I am."

"That's so."

"Yes; of course."

"I'll call to-morrow."

"Do so."

They parted.

Bell reported to his mates, and the matter was arranged.

A carriage was to be provided and everything in readiness for the abduction.

The next day a bogus permit was made out to admit Maggie Mullins, aged seventy-five years, to the Old Woman's Home, and signed with the names of the proper ones.

Bell carried it to Ed Slaughter that evening and showed it to him.

"The Home will send a carriage for her at two p. m. to-morrow."

"She'll be ready at that time."

When the carriage came, Bell was inside, disguised as an elderly female, and in a few minutes the old lady was driven off with him.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ABDUCTORS FOILED.

Elsie Slaughter was loth to part with her grandmother.

She loved the dear old lady very much, but the wishes of her husband were law in all things.

She wept like a child as she kissed the dear old lady, and avowed that she would call at the Old Woman's Home every week to see her.

The old woman was dazed at thus being turned over to a charitable institution in her old age, and that, too, by her own kith and kin.

On the way from the home of the Slaughter cottage she was silent for awhile, thinking about going among strangers to live, and wondering if she was to remain there to the end.

The sedate looking woman by her side did not attempt to disturb her thoughts until the carriage had been going nearly a half hour.

Old Mag Mullins did not dream that her companion was a man in disguise.

On the contrary, she believed that he was one of the matrons of the home to which she was going.

"You are sad at parting with your grand-daughter?" remarked Bell, the bogus female.

"Yes, I have been with her a long time," was the reply.

"You will like the Home much better than you imagine, as you will have comfortable quarters, plenty to eat and drink, and all the day long to read and talk. When one has been there a month she could not be persuaded to leave, on account of the strong friendships formed there—the peace and quietude of the place and interest each takes in the other."

"I am glad to hear that," said the old lady.

"Yes, one can sit all day long and talk of the past without anybody interfering to make mischief. Mr. Slaughter seemed to want to get rid of you on account of you talking so much. Now, I think it a shame that an old lady can't be allowed to talk as much as she pleases, and in her home, too, without somebody making mischief out of it."

"Yes—yes!" and old Mag at once became interested, for she had a very bitter feeling in her heart against Ed Slaughter for sending her away. "Just because I answered questions that were asked me somebody would throw stones against the house and raise a big fuss about nothing."

"We heard something about that, but could never get the straight of it. Some people are so queer. What was it all

about? We heard that it was something about Jack Nelson."

"Yes—about a great wrong he had committed, and I am the only one now living who knows all about it, save the guilty ones."

"Why have not the guilty ones been punished?"

"Because they have too much money. They paid those who knew about it to keep their mouths shut."

"But they have not paid you, have they?"

"No, indeed. They don't know how much I know, nor how I got hold of it."

"How did you get hold of the secret, Mrs. Mullins?"

"One who died in my arms told me about it on her death-bed."

"Ah! It must be true, then!"

"Yes, every word of it."

"Did she leave any proof of the truth of the story?"

"Oh, the truth can be easily found if they only look in the right place for it."

"Well, it's a strange, strange thing," said the bogus female. "I've often read of such things. Sometime, when you have the chance, I want you to tell me the whole story, as I am very much inter——"

Here a stone crashed through the glass of both windows of the carriage, and fell in the bushes on the left-hand side of the road.

"Whoa! Whoa!" yelled the driver, tugging at the reins with all his might.

The animals reared and plunged as if they would run away and smash things generally.

But he managed to hold them in hand; and just as he succeeded in bringing them to a standstill, Bell, though dressed as a female, sprang out of the carriage, revolver in hand, and looked wildly around for the thrower of the stone.

"It came out of that clump of bushes back there!" cried the driver, who was the other detective employed in the case.

Bell dashed toward the clump of bushes, and in a minute or so was lost to sight.

The moment he entered the bushes, however, he heard someone running toward the woods beyond.

He gave chase with grim determination, and soon caught sight of two men running at the top of their speed.

He raised his revolver and took deliberate aim at one of them and fired.

The man gave a howl and stopped.

The other kept on.

"Stop or you die!" cried Bell.

"Don't shoot!" called out the other man.

"Stop, then—hold up your hands!"

The man held up both hands above his head until Bell came up to him.

"So I have you at last!" exclaimed Bell.

The wounded man groaned:

"You have done for me!"

"Oh, I guess not," said Bell. "Where are you hit?"

"In the back," and the man laid down on the half-covered ground, and groaned as if in the greatest pain.

"Well, I am sorry, yet glad that we have dropped on you two. You have puzzled us for a good while. How did you manage to work it so long without being caught?"

"We are private detectives and know how to work on the quiet," replied the man, who was still holding up his hands above his head.

"What's it all about, anyhow?"

"Well, we ain't giving the thing away."

"You ain't, eh?"

"No."

"Well, I'll give you two over to the sheriff. Maybe that will be giving some things away."

"Drop it where it is, and we'll give you the snap and go away," said the man with his hands up.

"Out with it, then!" said Bell.

"You'll let us go?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, a short time ago a man came to us in New York and daughter—Mrs. Elsie Slaughter—had been hinting about a secret lately which very much disturbed a friend of his."

"Hold on! Who was that man?"

"I don't know. He wouldn't give any name, but laid down a sum of money and a lot of instructions for us to follow. He engaged us to see that the old woman did not tell the secret to anybody, and if she could not be prevented from doing so to abduct her, and take her to some place of concealment, and keep her till we heard from him again. We came to Salem, found her, and soon got the lay of the whole thing——"

"Except the secret?"

"Yes, except the secret. We found that she was very superstitious, believing in spirits and all that sort of thing. One or both of us kept up such a watch on the house that nothing was said or done there which we did not either hear or see. Just at the time she was about to give the story away we had to throw a big stone against the house to give her a scare. She was too superstitious to try to tell it again till she got over the scare. We dropped on you fellows and found out your game, and——"

"Well, I must say you are good detectives," said Bell, "for you have puzzled us more than ever we were before, and you have so far succeeded in keeping us from getting at the old woman's secret. You may go, but if you get in our way again you are goners. Is your friend much hurt?"

said that an old woman in Salem, living with her grand-

"I don't know; we'll see."

The other man simply had a bullet in his shoulder, instead of his back, which made an exceedingly painful though not dangerous wound.

"You can walk back to town and take the train for New York," said Bell, "and that's the best thing for you to do."

When Bell went back to the carriage he found the driver waiting patiently for him, and the old lady in a dead swoon from which they could not recall her.

"This is a deuce of a muss," he said.

"Yes, so it is. Did you see anybody?"

"Yes, two men. They have been doing all that stone busi-

ness. I gave one a bullet, and then got the story from 'em."

"Good! What's to be done now?"

"Nothing. The old woman is in a dead faint. We'll have to carry her back to Slaughter's house, and tell him the Home wouldn't receive her after they had heard of the stone-throwing business."

"Yes, that's so," and they proceeded to return to the Slaughter cottage.

When the carriage drove up to her door again, Mrs. Slaughter was most agreeably surprised.

"Why, what's the matter?" she exclaimed. "Oh, grandma, you have come home again!"

The old woman had partially recovered, but was in such a terrified condition that she scarcely knew what was said to her. She was hurried into the house, where it was explained to Elsie that the Home, at the last moment, had refused to receive her on account of the stone-throwing business.

"You see that a stone struck the carriage and almost destroyed it."

Elsie looked at the carriage in dumfounded amazement, and then said:

"I know that my husband will be very much disappointed, but I think I can prevent any recurrence of that business."

"Well, I don't think you can get the Home or any other institution to take her. She's too dangerous," and Bell left as quickly as he could, to avoid running any risk of discovery as to his personality.

But the neighbors had seen the old lady leave, and also the return, as well as noticed the wrecked condition of the carriage. They came flocking in to hear the news.

In a few moments it was known that a flying stone had nearly destroyed the carriage, and that the Old Woman's Home had refused to receive the old lady in consequence.

Many of them crossed themselves and expressed the opinion that the Evil One had something to do with the thing, and made haste to get away from the house.

That evening, when Ed Slaughter returned home, he was surprised at finding the old lady still there.

"The Home will not receive her," said his wife.

"What! After granting a permit to her?"

"No. They heard about the stone-throwing business, and backed out."

"The deuce! That leaves her on our hands, then."

"Yes, but don't worry, dear. I'll see that no one gets a chance to talk to her hereafter."

"Well, we'll see," and he sat down to think about the mystery of the old woman's secret.

Jack knew that somebody had started some ugly stories about him, and that some people believed them.

But he had not been able to get at the authors of them. He had punished Henry Wildey for what he had said to Myrtis Banning, and had thus incurred the undying hate of that young man and his friends.

Yet he did not suspect that there was a systematic attempt being made to ruin his character, and thus cause his expulsion from the volunteer fire department.

But trouble was thickening around him in spite of his quiet attention to his duties. Under such a state of feeling it was impossible to keep anything secret very long.

The truth about the fight with Hicks came by degrees, until everybody in the town knew it. The two officers who had been witnesses to the first encounter, after incautiously dropping a few hints, were induced finally to tell all they knew about it.

Of course, it spread like a wildfire, and all sorts of versions were given. The policemen told about the challenge when they parted, but said that they had no idea that they would meet again that night.

But that they did meet was proved by Jack's presence at Mackin's drug store with him.

"I have nothing to say," said Jack, when questioned about it.

"I have nothing to relate," replied Jim, to all questions put to him.

"But did you fight?" one asked.

Jim looked at the man and smiled.

The excitement ran up to fever heat, and the firemen were so much wrought up by the situation that the chief of the fire department seriously considered the idea of giving each company certain territory to look after, to avoid a collision at some fire.

The Salem Boys were jubilant when they heard that their young leader was the one who had given Hicks the beautiful pair of black eyes he had received so mysteriously.

They wanted to congratulate him, but he would not allow it.

"Drop it, boys," he said. "The less we say about such things the better."

"But they are trying to ruin you, Jack," said Billy Malone.

"Yes, I know they are; but they will get sick of that after awhile. I have never done anything that I am ashamed of. We can always take care of ourselves if we do right."

"But what did you and Jim——"

"Drop that, please," he answered very promptly.

They did drop, and during the evening nothing more was said about it by the boys.

But at another engine room the matter was discussed in another spirit altogether.

Wildey, Nick Bell, Tom Bussy, whose broken head had so far recovered as to allow him to come out of the hospital, and Wright, who had also left the hospital the day before, sat in a corner and talked the matter over.

"I think it is time Jack was treated to a broken head, too," said Henry Wildey.

"Yes, and I'd like to be the one to do it," replied Bell.

CHAPTER XV.

OUR HERO DEFIES HIS ENEMIES.

Let us now return to our hero, whom we left following the even tenor of his way as a clerk in the store of Burdock & Co.

"You can have the chance any time you want it," remarked Wright.

"How?"

"By just going up to him and saying something to him that will make him strike you."

"Yes, but I will make myself liable to a fine if I did that."

"Oh, I'll pay the fine," said Wildey.

"Well, I may give you a chance to pay one for me."

"I'd be glad to do so if you will only give him a good drubbing. By the way, have you sent a man to Mayfield to look up his record there?"

"Yes," replied Bell. "He left yesterday."

"Did you give him all the points about him?"

"Yes, as far as in my power."

Then they had Bell to tell all he had learned about the stone being thrown through a carriage in which old Mag Mullins was riding.

He did not let anyone but Wildey know that he was the one in the carriage with old Mag.

"But I caught the stone throwers," he whispered to Wildey, and then he told him the story, adding:

"Keep dark. They won't throw any more, and the next time we'll get the whole story."

That story of the wrecked carriage was in everybody's mouth, and finally somebody went to the managers of the Old Woman's Home to make inquiry about it.

The managers denied all knowledge of the case, and said that no permit had been granted to Mag Mullins.

Then someone told Ed Slaughter that no permit had been granted at all, and that there was something wrong about it.

Ed hunted up Nick Bell to demand an explanation.

Bell told an ingenious story that quieted his anger, and the Slaughter family once more settled down to its old routine of life.

It was just at this time that the mayor's residence took fire—late in the night—when every member of the household was wrapt in slumber.

The Salem Boys were again the first at the fire, by reason of the fact that a majority of them were at the engine house at the time the alarm came.

The fire had started in the lower part of the house, and had cut off all retreat from the bedrooms when it was discovered.

The mayor had tried to let down members of his family by means of sheets made into a rope, when the ladder of the Salem Boys was raised to the window.

Jack was the first one up.

He seized two little children and quickly passed them out to Billy Malone, who passed them down the ladder in double-quick time.

Then he rushed into another room, and found a little boy suffocating in the dense smoke.

Just then the window was raised by members of No. 3.

"Here—take him out!" cried Jack, handing the boy to a fireman.

The fireman took him and carried him down the ladder, whilst Jack seized another daughter of the family and climbed out of the window on to the ladder of No. 3.

He was not recognized by the multitude till he was nearly down to the bottom of the ladder.

Then the crowd yelled, and the members of No. 3 rushed forward in a body as if to relieve him of the burden.

But the moment the half-unconscious girl was taken from him, he was struck down as if by a thunderbolt. A score of firemen rushed over him, as if in the eager excitement of rescuing somebody from the flames.

The Salem Boys saw what had happened, and made a rush toward the foot of the other ladder.

In a moment they had the unconscious form of their young leader in their arms. But few of them really understood what had happened, and so he was borne away without much notice being taken as to the cause of his condition.

The firemen of both companies worked hard, and succeeded in saving all the household and one half of the building.

But at the hospital, where he was carried, Jack Nelson remained unconscious till morning, and then he told the story of the attack made on him by the members of the other company, whose ladder he had used in rescuing the mayor's daughter from the flames.

CHAPTER XVI.

JACK FACES OLD MAG MULLINS.

The news of Jack's version of the attack on him spread like wildfire over the town.

People became very much excited over it.

The mayor and chief of the fire department went to the hospital to see him.

He repeated his story.

"I came down their ladder," he said, "with the girl in my arms, feeling as well as I ever did in my life, and when I reached bottom somebody took her from me. The next moment I received a blow on my head from behind that laid me senseless at the foot of the ladder. Then I felt 'em walking all over me, as if a whole troop of cavalry was passing."

"Who struck you?" the mayor asked.

"I don't know. I was struck from behind. But I do know that I was completely surrounded by No. 3 men."

The mayor and chief of the fire department sent for the foreman of the other company to show cause why his company should not be suspended from further duty till the guilty ones were caught and punished.

Wright came, and swore that he knew nothing about the matter; that he did not believe that Jack had received any injury from the members of No. 3.

"That won't do," said the mayor, shaking his head. "A thousand people saw him descend your ladder into the very midst of your crowd. The next moment he is beaten down and trampled under foot. It is the most disgraceful and cowardly act I ever heard of. No. 3 is suspended from duty and membership in the fire department until this matter is clearer up."

It was a terrible blow to No. 3.

The disgrace they had sought to put upon Jack had fallen upon their own heads.

They made all sorts of protests, but in vain.

The mayor and fire chief were inexorable, and the public suspension of the entire company was announced.

Jack was laid up for four days in the hospital, during which time Myrtis Banning came there to see him.

"Jack," she said, "I am going away for a few days, and bring you these flowers to remember me to you while I am away."

"Thanks, Myrtis," he said. "I hope you don't think I could forget you."

"Oh, I don't know, Jack," she replied. "The flowers will not let you forget me, though."

She went away, and that evening took the train for Mayfield.

Myrtis went on a secret mission with the consent of her parents, who had relatives in Mayfield with whom she could stop while there.

When Jack came out of the hospital the boys gave him a reception, at which hundreds of the best ladies and gentlemen of Salem danced.

The members of No. 3, however, were more bitter than ever, and vowed that they would show him up in colors that would make the people of Salem sick of him.

A week later another alarm of fire was given, and Jack and his boys sped away like young heroes for the post of danger.

This time the fire was in the Slaughter cottage.

Mr. and Mrs. Slaughter had managed to save themselves with nothing but their night-clothes on.

Old Mag Mullins had fallen to the floor, overcome by the smoke.

Jack found her lying on the floor, and soon had her in his arms and descending the ladder with her.

She was taken into a neighbor's house in an unconscious condition, and the family physician was summoned.

He administered to her several hours without restoring consciousness.

"She may have received some internal injury which consciousness only can reveal," he said.

Jack and his brave boys worked hard to save the cottage. But the most of it was destroyed, together with nearly all the contents.

It was a hard blow to Ed Slaughter, who was a hard-working mechanic. The very next day the Salem Boys chipped in and subscribed one dollar each to a fund for his benefit.

That started a subscription that swelled to over a thousand dollars in two days—twice the worth of the furniture that had been destroyed.

They at once sought another house, and in a week's time were settled down as comfortably as they had ever been.

The old lady was not able to talk any for nearly two weeks, when one day she asked Elsie about the fire.

Elsie told her all she knew about it, how brave Jack Nelson had saved her life at the risk of his own.

"Did Jack save me?" she asked.

"Yes—it was Jack."

The old woman buried her thin old face in her hands for a minute or two, and then said:

"Send for him—tell him I must see him at once."

Elsie sent off for Jack posthaste.

He came with Billy Malone.

Elsie led him into the room, and said:

"Grandma, here is Jack Nelson, who saved your life."

She turned and gazed at him.

"No, no, no!" she cried. "He is not Jack! He is not Jack!"

CHAPTER XVII.

OLD MAG SENDS FOR JACK.

The sudden exclamation of the old lady that the gallant young fireman was not Jack Nelson caused a decided sensation among those around her bed.

She glanced at Jack, and Jack gazed at her like one in a dream.

"Did you ever see her before?" one asked of Jack.

"Yes," he replied. "I remember having seen her several years ago in the town of Mayfield, but she has changed a great deal since then," and he looked at the old woman with intense interest.

"You say he is not Jack Nelson?" she was asked.

"Yes, I do say that. The Jack Nelson I have been speaking of is old enough to be this young man's father," and the old lady gazed at him with a nervous interest that puzzled both him and the others present.

"Oh," said Jack, "you speak of John Nelson, the rich property owner of Mayfield, do you not?"

"Yes—but I always called him Jack."

"I am not even a relative of his."

"No—you—are—not—even—Jack Nelson," said the old lady, in jerky sentences that indicated great nervous alarm.

"What! I am not Jack Nelson?"

"No—you are not."

"Who am I, then?"

The old woman looked terribly frightened, and seemed afraid to answer the question.

"Who am I, then?" Jack repeated.

"Oh, my God, the stones will fly again if I answer you."

"By the great stone mountain!" cried Jack. "I want to understand this thing, even though all the stones in Salem take wings and fly. I am the son of Sarah Nelson, now dead, or I am not. Which is the truth?"

"You are not her son!" said the old lady, white as a sheet.

"Who am I, then?"

She hesitated.

A look of terror came into her eyes.

"Send for Ed, Elsie," she finally said, turning to her granddaughter.

Elsie sent a little boy, the son of a neighbor, to tell her husband to come home immediately.

An hour later he arrived.

"What's the trouble here?" he asked of Elsie, after seeing so many others in the house.

"When grandma was told that Jack Nelson had saved her life," Elsie said, "she asked me to send for him right away, and I did so. Jack came, and the moment she laid eyes on him she exclaimed:

"'Why, you are not Jack Nelson!'"

"The deuce she did!" ejaculated Ed.

"Yes, and then she told him that his name was something else, but is afraid to say more for fear the stones will fly again, and asked me to send for you, which I did."

"Well, what does she want with me?"

"I don't know."

He went in and saw the old lady, and asked:

"What is it now, grandma?"

The old lady turned to him and said:

"I have sent for the man who saved my life, expecting to see the Jack Nelson I knew in Mayfield. When he came I found him to be a mere boy—not Jack Nelson at all."

"Well, what of that? You have simply been making a mistake all along."

"Yes, but I owe this young man a debt of gratitude which I can only repay with your consent."

Ed was puzzled.

He did not know what to make of her words.

"You have my consent to show your gratitude in any way you please," he said.

"I only want to tell him who he is and who has wronged him, but I am afraid the stones will fly if I do."

Ed was surprised.

He looked around at the eager faces of the others, and then said:

"Let 'em fly, grandma."

The old woman was relieved, and said to him:

"I am glad, for it has been a burden on my mind. I didn't want to say anything more about it till you said so. I would not have thought much about it but for hearing the name of Jack Nelson so often spoken of as having saved the lives of people at fires. I asked somebody if Jack came from Mayfield, and I was told that he did. Then I began talking about what a bad man he was, and when I started to tell of the crimes he had committed the stones struck the house. I have lived in a state of terror ever since. When they told me that Jack Nelson had saved my life I thought I would send for him and let him know that I knew his secret, and out of consideration for the saving of my life give him a chance to undo the wrong he had done without the world finding him out. When he came I was amazed at finding him another man altogether. But he is the one above all others most concerned in what I have to say. This young man here is not the real Jack Nelson. His real name is not Nelson at all, but Alphonse——"

At that moment the sound of a small pitcher of water falling to the floor in a corner of the room startled her. Elsie herself had brushed it off the table accidentally.

But so nervous was the old woman that she gave a scream of terror and went off into a deathlike swoon.

"There she goes again!" cried Ed. "Throw water in her face and send for the doctor."

Elsie picked up the broken pitcher and ran into the kitchen, whence she soon returned with another one half full of water. She dashed water in the old lady's face, and someone ran in haste for the family physician.

The doctor soon came, and, after hearing what had occurred, said she had swooned through nervousness, and that she would soon recover.

They worked patiently to restore her, and some of the neighbors came in to render such assistance as they could.

In a little while quite a party were gathered in the little cottage of the Slaughters.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MYRTIS BANNING GOES ON A SECRET MISSION.

Let us now go back a week to the little town of Mayfield, of which frequent mention has been made in this story.

Mayfield was some sixty miles distant from Salem, and quite a flourishing little town.

On the south side of the town lived a family of the name of Welsh, in a beautiful white cottage.

It consisted of husband and wife and a sixteen-year-old daughter.

Mrs. Welsh was the sister of Mrs. Banning, of Salem, the mother of Myrtis, who had come to Mayfield without giving her any notice of her intention to do so.

She folded her niece in her arms and kissed her, for she loved her sister's pet even as her own child.

The two cousins loved each other as two sisters, and had no secrets from each other whenever they were together.

"Oh, Myrtis!" cried Fannie, "I am so glad you have come. I am going to a surprise party to-morrow night, and you must go with us. We'll have so much fun."

"But I can't go, Fannie," replied Myrtis. "I came only for a few days, and did not bring even a change of clothes with me."

"You know that all my clothes fit you," said Fannie, "and you shall wear the best of them."

"I can't do that, for I don't want the boys and girls to now that I am here."

"Why not, pray?"

"Because I came here for a purpose, and when I have done what I came for I must hasten back home."

"Why, what in the world are you up to, Myrtis Banning?" exclaimed Fannie's mother, looking at her niece in an alarmed sort of way.

"Nothing wrong, aunt," replied Myrtis, very promptly. "Just write to mother, and ask her if she knows where I am and what I am here for."

"What are you here for?" Mrs. Welsh asked in true woman fashion.

"That I will tell you before I go home, but not now. You have confidence in me, aunt?"

"Why, yes, child! But whatever in the world does all this mean?"

"Just wait, aunt, and you shall know all."

"Is there a young man in it?"

"Don't ask any questions now, please, nor say a word to anybody about my being here."

Mrs. Welsh and her daughter were in a fever of curiosity about Myrtis' visit, but would not say any more about it till such time as she was ready to talk to them about it.

In the evening, when John Welsh, her aunt's husband, came home, Myrtis took him into the parlor and had a long secret talk with him.

When they had talked together for a half hour, Mrs. Welsh was called in and consulted.

The result of the consultation was that a disguise was gotten up for Myrtis that night, which she assumed the next morning.

It was the disguise of an old woman of a sort of poverty-stricken appearance—a faded dress, shawl, bonnet, shoes that had evidently been discarded by somebody else, and face and hands which seemed to have been long pledged against the use of water.

In this disguise she left the Welsh cottage the next morning, followed by her uncle at a safe distance, who was not to lose sight of her or her locality.

She wended her way down across the railroad track over among the poverty-stricken people in that region.

The residents down there were not only very poor, but some of them very low and vicious in their habits and way of living.

In front of one of the old, tumbling shanties she saw a ragged child standing, looking lazily about.

"Can you tell me where Mrs. Branch lives?" she asked of the child.

"Yessum," said the child. "That's her ercomin' down ther street," and he pointed in the direction of a fat, ugly old woman, who was waddling along toward her.

Myrtis looked at the old hag and shuddered for a moment.

Then she went resolutely forward to meet her.

"Are you Mrs. Branch?" she asked, when she met the old woman.

"Yes, that's my name," answered the old dame, eyeing our heroine suspiciously.

"I was told that you could help me find a house in this neighborhood which I could rent, live in, and let rooms to lodgers, and I was on my way to see you."

Mrs. Branch was on her way to the corner grocery to get a nip of gin, and the thought immediately occurred to her that she could get a drink or two for nothing out of the stranger.

"Yes, mum," she said. "I know everybody in Mayfield, an' every house, too. Would yer mind goin' ter ther grocery with me now, an' then I can tell yer all you want ter know."

"There's no need to go to the grocery, Mrs. Branch. I am a respectable woman who always keeps something handy for

use. If it's something for the stomach you want, I have it here in my pocket—some of the best gin you ever tasted."

"La, now! How did you know that, mum? I always keep some of the stuff in the house myself, an' I was just goin' ter tell Moloney ter send me over a gallon of his best gin. Come ter my house, mum, an' welcome to yer, an' then I'll see if I can't find yer the house yer want."

Mrs. Branch turned and led the way back to the tumble-down shanty which she called "my house," and Myrtis followed her.

The shanty was an exemplification of poverty and wretchedness. The woman was strong and hearty, and could well have supported herself decently, not to say respectably, had she not been addicted to drinking intoxicants.

The furniture in the shanty was of the simplest kind, and as old as the mistress herself. Everything not of absolute necessity had been pawned for drink, and the cupboard was as bare of food as the floor was of carpet.

"Take a seat, mum," said Mrs. Branch. "Take a seat an' make yerself ter home. I'm sorry, but I had a party of friends ter see me last night who ate up all the roast I had yesterday, so I can't offer yer nothin' till I go ter ther butcher."

"Don't worry about that, Mrs. Branch," said our heroine. "I am not hungry, and when I am I can pay for a meal for both of us."

"Ah, yer talk like ther true woman yer is, mum," said Mrs. Branch, as she saw her visitor draw a black flask from the capacious pocket of her faded old dress.

"Taste of that, Mrs. Branch," said the visitor, as she handed her the bottle, "and tell me if you ever tasted better stuff in all your life."

Mrs. Branch turned up the bottle and took a long, strong pull with closed eyes and great suction power.

"Ah! such gin!" she ejaculated, as she lowered the bottle and smacked her lips. "It's ther best I ever tasted in my life, an' I have had ther best in my day, mum."

"Yes, it's the very best," said our heroine. "I have a brother in the liquor business in New York, and he sends me a ten-gallon keg of gin every month."

"Ten gallons every month?"

"Yes, ten gallons. Of course, I don't drink a gallon a month myself, but one must always have a little for friends when they drop in, you know."

"Of course—yes—excuse me, mum—but I must taste it agin—just a taste, yer know," and she turned up the flask and took another strong pull at the contents.

Then she handed it back to Myrtis, who held it to her lips as if she, too, was taking a good drink. But she never even let a drop enter her mouth.

"There, you may keep the bottle for your own use, Mrs. Branch, and she pushed the flask toward the old woman.

"May yer never want a drop an' can't get it, mum!" exclaimed the woman, as she took the bottle and placed it in the pocket of her dress.

Then they sat and talked till the old woman was maudlin

drunk. Myrtis drew her out in a certain direction, and obtained information she was eager to get.

Leaving the old woman lying across the table at which she sat, she hastened away from the shanty to join her uncle, who was waiting for her out on the street.

CHAPTER XIX.

JACK AND TOM BUSSY ONCE MORE.

While the women were working with Elsie Slaughter to restore old Mrs. Mullins to consciousness, the men went back to the sitting-room to wait and talk over the new turn things had suddenly taken.

She had said enough before going off into the swoon to set them all thinking. And none of them thought harder than Jack Nelson did.

She had upset him completely.

He was not even Jack Nelson.

He didn't know who he was.

He wanted to know as much as anyone ever wanted to know a thing.

"Well, what do you think of it, Jack?" Ed Slaughter asked.

"I don't know. I'm like one in a dream," he replied. "I wish she had finished before she went off in that faint."

"She is nervous," said Ed, "and when she heard that pitcher fall she thought another stone had struck the house."

"Yes—yes—I know. I am sorry for her. She must suffer very much in being so very nervous."

None of the party present had heard that the stone throwers had been caught and sent away. Bell, Hicks, and Wildey had decided to keep that fact concealed.

"Here comes the doctor," said Ed. "He may tell us something. How is she, doctor?"

"She is doing very well," replied the doctor, "and will get on all right now."

"Has she come to?" Ed asked.

"Yes, but is very weak from fright."

"Brace her up and let's see if we can't get her to resume the story where she left off. I want to have this thing ended. It worries my wife almost to death."

"Better not worry the old lady any more to-day. Wait till to-morrow, and I'll be present to hear her."

The physician left the house to attend to other patients, but Jack and two or three friends remained with Ed to see the end of the thing.

In the evening Tom Bussy, who had been nearly killed by a flying stone near the cottage which had been burned down, called to see Ed.

He was surprised to find Jack and two of the Salem Boys firemen there.

"You know Jack Nelson?" said Ed, introducing them to each other.

"Yes," said Tom, "we all know him, of course," but he did not shake hands with the young hero, nor even recognize the introduction.

Ed saw the action of his old friend and was indignant.

"Nelson is a friend of mine," he said, loud enough to be heard by all in the room, "and we owe him a debt of gratitude which can never be paid, I fear."

"Yes, I suppose so," remarked Tom, very carelessly.

"There are others who feel as I do," added Ed.

"There are a good many who don't, too," said Tom, looking Ed in the face.

"Possibly, but they are not men," retorted Ed.

That was a challenge, and Tom was about to strike, when Jack sprang forward and planted himself between them, saying:

"This is foolish!"

"Yes, when a fool interferes," sneered Tom, putting on his hat and starting toward the door.

Jack sprang forward and planted himself before the fireman.

"Tom Bussy," he said, "I won't resent your remark. I know you are my bitter enemy. But I have never done you any wrong. I demand of you here and now to say whether I have ever done aught to give you just cause for being my enemy."

Tom glared at him as a tiger would glare at its enemy face to face.

"I am your enemy because you are a disgrace to the fire department of Salem," was the stinging reply to his demand.

Quick as a flash Jack landed a blow between his eyes that laid him out at full length on the floor.

"I beg your pardon, Ed Slaughter," he said, "but I can't stand everything."

"No. You served him right," and Ed grasped the young hero's hand and shook it warmly.

Tom slowly pulled himself together and looked around him in a dazed sort of way.

Then he suddenly realized what had happened, and scrambled to his feet, pistol in hand.

But Jack was too quick for him.

He grasped his wrist, wrenched the weapon from his hand, and held his head, hissing:

"If you don't want to be made worm's meat of take back your words."

Tom was not quite ready to die just to prove that he was game.

He spoke promptly.

"I take it all back," he said.

"All right. Others have got to do the same thing, and that very soon. I've stood as much slander as I care to, and hereafter somebody must suffer for what is said to my injury."

Just then the door was thrown open, and Myrtis Banning rushed in.

"Jack! Jack!" she cried, "I know all! I have been to Mayfield. John Nelson is dead, and the wealth that should have been yours always will come to you now!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE YOUNG GIRL'S STORY.

The words and excited manner of the young girl created a sensation.

Jack himself was as much astonished as anyone else.

He sprang forward and caught her hand in his, saying:

"I don't know what you mean, Myrtis. Can you explain?"

"Yes. I heard enough the other day to convince me that somebody was trying to work up a mystery of some kind, and make it affect your ruin. We have relatives in Mayfield, and so I paid them a visit for the purpose of seeing what I could find out about it. That is where I was going when I told you I was going away."

"Yes," and Jack nodded his head toward her. "I recollect wondering where you were going."

"Well, I went to my aunt's house in South Mayfield—she is the wife of John Welsh there—and proceeded at once to hunt up a certain old woman whom you know well."

"Who was she?"

"A certain old lady who lived down across the railroad in one of the little old shanties there. Don't call her name now, for it would do no good, as you know how hard she drinks."

"Yes, yes. I know whom you mean but what has she to do with me or mine?" and he looked more and more surprised than ever.

"She has nothing to do with you or yours, only I suspected that she knew enough to clear up the mystery that surrounded you."

"A mystery surrounding me?"

"Yes, of which you have not even suspected," she returned. "One day a lady friend told me that she had heard old lady Mullins say that all those who knew the secret were dead save herself, and that the guilty ones believed the knowledge of the crime she had hinted at had died with Sarah Nelson, whom you had always known as your mother."

"Was she not my mother?"

"No."

"This is indeed a mystery?"

"Yes, and I think I have succeeded in unraveling it for you. Where I have failed I am sure Mrs. Mullins can do it."

"Yes—yes—go on."

"Well, I soon learned that the old lady who was drinking so hard was an intimate friend of your reputed mother—Sarah Nelson—and that she was with her when she died."

"Yes—so she was. I recollect her very well as being with her most of the time," said Jack.

"I disguised myself as an old lady and went to see her on the pretense that I wanted to hire a shanty in her vicinity, commodious enough to allow me to let furnished rooms and thus make my rent and food. She took a fancy to me at once—more perhaps because I was liberal in my orders to the corner grocery, and she agreed to help me find such a place as I wanted. We were together several days, but did not waste much time in house-hunting. I encouraged her to talk and tell me all about her neighbors, and she proved to be the worst old gossip I ever saw. She drank gin and talked all day long, giving bits of history concerning every family in that part of the town. At last she spoke of Jack Nelson, the richest man in Mayfield, who has been dead these two months, and said:

"He died rich, but he had no right to all his wealth."

"How could that be?" I asked.

"He took that which belonged to a child of a friend who died, and left an only son and a big fortune in his care. He gave the heir, then a mere child, to an old woman named Sarah Nelson, and put his own son in his place, and gave him the name of the heir."

"Good Lord!" gasped Jack, leaning heavily against the door of the middle room.

"You are not Jack Nelson, but Cecil Graham."

Jack gave her a look of dumfounded amazement. He was almost paralyzed with astonishment.

"Cecil Graham," continued Myrtis, "had three strawberry marks on his left arm, which both nurse and physician knew well. The nurse went away, and was gone some ten years or more. Then she came back to see the child, and in a little while discovered that the particular marks were missing. She raised a row, and that night she was mysteriously murdered, and the murderer was never found out."

"My God!" groaned Jack. "I have the marks on my left arm!"

"Yes, you once told me of those marks. Well, the boy disappeared, and the man known in Mayfield as John Nelson, though some people would call him Jack, as they do you, the guardian, remained in possession of the property up to the day of his death, which took place suddenly about two months ago. Now, Jack, you are Cecil Graham, the heir of all that estate which John Nelson had charge of so long. The physician will swear to the marks, and old Granny Mullins can give other information that will prove that you are Cecil Graham and not Jack Nelson. The woman I talked to so much told me that Sarah Nelson had told her all about it before she died."

CHAPTER XXI.

UNFOLDING THE MYSTERY.

The next day the physician remained several hours with old Mag Mullins, administering medicines to enable her to keep up her strength.

Evening came, and with it came Myrtis Banning and Judge Malden, whom Jack had asked to be present as his counsel, if counsel were needed. A half dozen other friends came also, and all were eager and anxious to hear what was coming.

Mrs. Mullins was much better and she corroborated all that Myrtis had told, and made mention of a package of papers which old Sarah Nelson had left with her before she died, which she had in her trunk.

Elsie took the old lady's bunch of keys and opened the old trunk that had been doing service for more than half a century. Among many other things found there was a package of papers tied up with a cotton string.

Judge Malden took them and glanced over them.

Suddenly he grasped Jack's hand and said:

"Cecil, my boy, you have the documents here to make your claim good, if you have the marks on your person to sustain the statements here made."

Jack threw off his coat, and rolled up his sleeve so as to bare his arm almost to the shoulder. Half way between the elbow and the shoulder were three strawberry marks, very clear and distinct, standing toward each other not unlike the three leaves of the shamrock.

The judge examined the marks very carefully, as did the old lady and all the others in the room.

"We have enough evidence to establish your identity beyond all doubt," remarked Judge Malden, "and so I congratulate you on having those three strawberries."

They all shook hands with him and the old lady, and went back to their homes feeling glad that such good fortune had come to such a good fellow as Jack Nelson.

Judge Malden lost no time in putting in his client's claim to the estate of his father. While the lawsuit for the estate was going on our hero stuck to his work and ran to the fires just as he had done ever since he became a fireman. But the ill-feeling of the members of No. 3 did not subside because of his good fortune. They declared that he was the cause of their suspension, and would not forgive him.

He went to the chief of the fire department and begged that the company be reinstated.

"On what ground?" the chief asked.

"On the ground that they are able firemen, and therefore needed in case of a large fire."

"That's enough," remarked the mayor, who was near when the request was made. "I think we had better let 'em go to work again, chief."

The order restoring No. 3 to the ranks again was issued that day, but when it was known that it had been done at Jack's request, Tom Bussy and Wright, the foreman, resigned in sheer disgust.

That night the great fire-bell sent out another alarm, and the Salem Boys, being on hand, sprang away with a promptness that astonished those near the engine house at the time.

CHAPTER XXII.

AND LAST.

The fire raged nearly all night, and over a dozen houses were swept away by it. Two lives were lost, and a member of Company No. 3 was saved from a horrible death by Jack, who went to his rescue at the imminent risk of his own life.

The man had been one of his bitterest enemies, but that only served to make the young hero more determined to save him. The daring rescue did much to soften the feeling toward him in the ranks of No. 3. But Nick Bell and Jim Hicks were not to be mollified.

The latter had vowed to have satisfaction for the thrashing he had received from the young hero, and waited long and patiently for the time to come when he could do so.

A month or so after he met Hicks in a stable where a number of firemen had gone to see some experiments made with a small fire apparatus.

They did not speak when they met, and the others noticed it. A very officious individual resolved to make them friends.

"See here, boys," he called out, "Jack and Jim ought to

shake hands and be friends. Two such good firemen ought not to be enemies. Shake hands, boys, shake hands."

"Say, you want to shut up," said Jim to the man, "or I'll smash your jaw for you!"

"Oh, you are still mad, are you?" exclaimed the man.

"Yes, and I can lick any man in this stable!" replied Jim.

"Ah, that was meant for me!" exclaimed Jack, turning suddenly around and facing Jim. "I am ready to repeat the dose, Jim."

Both men threw off their coats, and in another moment's time were facing each other with their guards up.

The dozen spectators stood around expecting to see our hero knocked out in one round. But they were doomed to be greatly disappointed, for Jack easily outpointed him, and in a few moments he was pretty much in the same condition as on the night of his encounter with the young fireman on the street.

"Do you want me to take you to Mackin's again?" Jack asked.

"No. Give me your hand, Jack," and he reached out his hand toward our hero. Jack took it.

"I am your friend from this time out, Jack. This has satisfied me."

The others yelled and shook hands all around, and from that moment Jack had more friends than ever before in his life. Three months later Judge Malden, after a hard legal fight, won the victory, and Jack was declared the legal heir to the Graham estate. The moment he heard the verdict he hastened to tell Myrtis Banning of his good fortune.

"I am glad for your sake, Jack," she said.

"And I am glad, too," he said, "for I want you to share it with me. I love you, Myrtis. Be my wife, and all I have shall be yours. Will you say yes, Myrtis?"

"Yes, Cecil—my Jack!" and the next moment she was caught in his arms and pressed to his heart.

They were soon afterward married, and went to live in a fine house, with servants, horses and carriage, her parents being well provided for.

The next winter old Mag Mullins died, and was buried by our hero in a lot he bought for the purpose, and a white marble shaft marks the spot to this day.

The Slaughters remained the firm friends of our hero, and are always welcomed at the Graham mansion. Though a father and the richest man in town, Cecil Graham is still one of the Salem Boys and a member of The Boss Fire Company of the Town.

THE END.

Read "THE SWAMP DOCTOR; or, THE MAN WITCH," by Allyn Draper, which will be the next number (501) of "Pluck and Luck."

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THINGS OF INTEREST.

It is a widespread belief that the animals of to-day are not so big as their ancestors. This, accordingly to Professor Ray Lankester, who concluded a course of interesting lectures on "Extinct Animals" at the Royal Institution recently, is quite a mistake. By way of prelude some excellent pictures of the skeletons of the giant flightless birds were thrown upon the screen, in order to show side by side the great difference between the ancient moa and the modern ostrich, the largest of living birds. Attention was also drawn to the extraordinary disparity in size between the little apteryx or kiwi—the smallest of the ostrich tribe—and its enormous egg and the egg of the giant moa. The lecturer then went on to describe giant salamanders as big as crocodiles, sharks sixty feet in length, and various bizarre types of fishes, representing the most ancient of all known vertebrates. Special emphasis was laid upon the fact that the popular notion that the animals of the past were a race of giants, compared with which our living giants are pigmies, is erroneous. No animals have ever exceeded or even equalled the sizes of the existing great whales; the modern dray horse far exceeds any fossil species.

There is a string of long days in the winter, followed by a series of short ones in the spring. In the summer the sun days get long again, though not quite so long as in the winter. In the autumn come the shortest days of all. Only occasionally are clock day and sun day of the same length. Only four times a year do clock noon by the clock hands and sun noon by the sun dial occur at the same moment; while, because the long and short sun days are found in sets, they oftentimes may be more than fifteen minutes apart. The vast majority of the people reckon their time by the sun. But time for civilized men is time by the clock. The days are all twenty-four hours long, and no matter where the sun is, it is noon for us when the clock strikes twelve. Nevertheless, astronomers often go by star time, get in an extra day in each year, and have their noon fall at all times of the day or night.

"Do you know," said a man who enjoys making observations upon human nature, "I believe that most women—nice women, too, I mean—will lie to their husbands, and think nothing whatever of doing so. I've often known instances of it before, but what reminded me of it to-day was a conversation I overheard on a car this morning. Two well-educated and refined women were talking about their financial affairs, and this was the story one of them told: 'You know, I've had some money in the — Bank for a good while. Well, a few weeks ago I heard vague rumors about the institution, and they finally worried me so that I went there, fully intending to draw out all I had. But after talking with the cashier, who

is a social acquaintance of ours, I was persuaded that my fears were foolish, and I went home without drawing the money. I didn't say a word to Bob about the matter.' (From previous remarks I had learned that 'Bob' was her husband.) 'About a week later we met Mr. —, the cashier, at the house of a friend. He at once began talking to me, right before Bob, about my visit to the bank, and my fears for its security. Bob looked bewildered till I cut in quickly and told him that Mr. — was simply jollying him, and trying to tease me. After a few seconds Mr. — saw through the situation and let the subject drop. Bob never suspected that there was any truth in the story.' Now," concluded the student of human nature, "that woman told this incident in a perfectly frank, matter-of-course tone, and I don't believe she ever had a qualm of conscience over it. Would a man have done that? But then, men are different."

OUR COMIC COLUMN.

Stern Parent—Young man, why didn't you answer me? Didn't you hear me calling you for the past ten minutes? Young Hopeful—Yes, pa. But then, you know, you always told me that little boys should be seen and not heard.

Thomas Beecham, the famous pill man, was a witty old gentleman. They tell a story about him and a grocer. The grocer was guilty of some rather sharp practice on Mr. Beecham one day, and the latter stamped out of the shop roaring: "You're a swindler, and I'll never enter your doors again!" Next day, though, he came back and bought five pounds of sugar. "Dear me," said the grocer, smiling in a forgiving way, "I thought you were never going to enter my doors again." "Well, I didn't mean to," said Mr. Beecham; "but yours is the only shop in the place where I can get what I want. You see, I am going to pot some bulbs, and I need sand."

An Indiana man tells of the efforts of an author belonging to the Hoosier school of historical novelists to put in his leisure time as a "hen farmer" in that State. The literary person's venture afforded his agricultural neighbors no end of amusement. During his first year the amateur farmer discovered that all his little chickens, which were confined in coops, were languishing at the point of death. The novelist went over his "hen literature" to locate the cause of the trouble, but to no avail. Finally he called upon an old chap named Rawlins, to whom he put the question: "What do you suppose is the matter with those chickens?" "Well, I dunno," said Rawlins. "What do you feed 'em?" "Feed them!" exclaimed the novelist-farmer. "Why, I don't feed them anything." "Then how'd you s'pose they was a-goin' to live?" "I presumed," replied the literary person, "that the old hens had milk enough for them now."

It is not necessarily great eloquence or wisdom that gives a lawyer influence over men's minds; the happy knack of telling a homely story with a "point" at just the auspicious moment has saved many a losing side. The world-wide exemplar of this is, of course, Abraham Lincoln; but he has had a multitude of followers. The late George Vest of Missouri was once defending a young man from the charge of larceny. The evidence against him was purely circumstantial, but strong. Vest claimed that no man should be convicted upon circumstantial evidence alone. "Why," he said, "when I was a boy, I knew another lad who, while his parents were absent, went to the pantry and nearly devoured a large custard pie. Then, fearing the consequences, he looked about for means of hiding the traces of his guilt. Seeing the cat, he took her, smeared her face and paws with the custard, and then, taking the innocent criminal into the backyard, he shot her. As he did so the boy observed to me, 'There goes one more victim of circumstantial evidence!' " He won the case.

OUR MYSTERIOUS BOARDER

By D. W. STEVENS.

It would be hard to find a more quiet, dull, out-of-the-way little village than Rawdon.

I took up my abode there in a large, rambling farmhouse, open for three months every year to summer visitors. There was a party of nine, who had had full possession of the farmhouse for several years, for the three summer months, and we rather resented the invasion when, one morning, Mrs. Deane informed us that she had rented her one vacant room to an invalid widow, who had stipulated to have her meals in her room. When the invalid widow arrived we watched her into her room with the natural curiosity of the occasion, and discussed what could be seen of her as we plied our needles, rocking-chairs and tongues at once. Presently Mrs. Deane came back to us.

"Ah, poor thing!" she said, pityingly, "she is very weak, and has had a long illness. All her hair has been cut off, and is in a little close crop, like a boy's; and she has lost her voice entirely—can't speak above a whisper. She is lying down, and I'm going to take her a cup of tea."

Some expressions of sympathy were exchanged, and then we discussed the latest fashions.

Amongst the letters that morning was one from my husband, who is a detective, and gave me the particulars of a great bank robbery, and his own share in the work of tracking the thieves.

"The man I am after," he wrote, "is Day. There is strong evidence against him, and it is probable that he has most of the missing bonds, money and valuables with him."

I took up the newspapers, of which John always sent me an ample supply wherever I might be, and read the account of the robbery; and then, as usual, my mind went over all the dangers to John, not comforted one bit by the possibility that he might secure the reward offered by the bank for the capture of the thieves.

It may be that my mind has been influenced by John's business, and that for that reason I can never come near a mystery without trying to solve it.

Now the widow was a mystery to me. My room was directly over hers, which was a small one on the first floor, that had never been used as a bedroom before, and opened into the garden on one side.

The first circumstance that attracted my attention was that the delicate invalid, who dared not risk the soft summer air in the daytime, was in the habit of stealing out of her room after the family had retired, and walking for hours in the night, sometimes in the garden, pacing up and down, sometimes going out at the gate, only to return hours later, and enter the house most cautiously, but not so softly that I did not hear her.

Another curious fact was that the trays of food carried to her room might have satisfied the appetite of a plowman; and yet more than once I knew that Mrs. Deane took up a second supply.

Once watching, I also discovered that the widow had a heavy step and a long stride in walking, more like a soldier than an invalid lady.

Each day I became more convinced that the seclusion of our new boarder was not caused by ill-health alone; but my utmost endeavors could not secure a glimpse of her face. Her curtains were always down, and she had been three weeks in the house without once crossing the sill of the door leading into the hall, while in her nocturnal rambles she wore her veil closely drawn.

But one day, when July was half gone, there was a picnic of all the visitors, who went away at unearthly morning hours in a great hay wagon, and were not to return until evening. At the last minute I decided to remain at home; but Mrs. Deane, finding my door fastened, thought I had gone with the rest.

Many times I had heard her voice in Mrs. Churchill's room, though the whispered answer was lost to me; but on that day I listened eagerly as she urged the invalid to sit for an hour upon the porch.

And the widow consented, and a little while after Mrs. Deane left her to go to a neighbor for some butter.

When she was gone, I stole upon slippered feet to the parlor. From one window, quite unseen myself, I watched the widow. For the first time I saw her face, a pale, strong-featured countenance, with closely-curling brown hair, not unattractive in a masculine style. Her hands, large and white, lay upon her lap, in constant motion, twisting a large, seal ring, plaiting the fringe of her shawl, pushing back her hair occasionally; but never still.

Suddenly she spoke—to the air, the roses, the flies, to me, though she did not know that—and in a rich, deep voice, said, with an oath, "I've half a mind to risk it."

Then, as if the sound of her voice scared her, she looked around her. Nothing terrifying was in sight, and, throwing off her shawl, she went to her own room through the door that opened upon the porch. Two minutes later she was back again, smoking a cigar.

I sped upstairs, put on my hat, stole down to the kitchen, out of the back door, and across to Mr. Cowley's, a farmer. Half an hour later I was on my way to the railway station as fast as Mr. Cowley's best horse could carry me.

A telegram to John was dispatched, and he came as fast as steam would bring him, and no one expected him when he drove up and brought two quiet-looking gentlemen to Mrs. Deane's.

"Now, then," John said, when we were alone, "where is Day?"

"Have you a photograph?"

One was given me.

"Yes," I said. "It is the same face, without the beard or mustache."

And I told John all I knew about our mysterious boarder.

There was no noise made. Early in the morning a closed carriage drove up to Mrs. Deane's gate, and the widow was roused from her morning nap before she could secure her pistol. Very quietly three men walked down the garden path to the gate, and the driver of the carriage was sent back for the trunk, in which was found the stolen property.

John bought me the prettiest cottage with the reward.

WRIGHT'S DESPERATE RESISTANCE

The little town of Oakland, in Burt county, Nebraska, has been stirred up over the receipt of a letter from a lady in Hartford, Conn., who claims to be the widow of Henry O. Steadman. Steadman was a wealthy rancher, highly respected, with a wife and two children, and his death, two years ago, was the first act in one of the most remarkable tragedies ever enacted in Nebraska. The Hartford lady, who signs herself Jane O. Steadman, says she first learned of his death a few days ago by accident, and she is satisfied from his description that he was her husband, who deserted her and came west several years ago. This the people of Oakland are loth to believe, for Steadman was one of the most popular men in the country, and a number of people shed their blood and even sacrificed their lives to avenge his death.

Among the employees on Steadman's ranch was a Mexican cowboy variously known as Johnson, Anderson, and Allen

Wright. He was a type of his class—tall, bronzed, with long black hair, piercing black eyes, a fearless rider, and a dead shot. Nothing particular was known of his previous history. He came to Burt county with a drove of cattle from a New Mexican ranch. He was of a sullen, taciturn disposition, and never engaged in conversation with anybody. Although supposed to be a desperate man, Steadman employed him on account of his skill in handling cattle. He, however, became careless of his duties, and on the 20th of March, 1886, Steadman discharged him. High words followed, and the Mexican, drawing a 42-calibre Colt's revolver, shot Steadman through the head, killing him instantly.

Calmly walking to the barn, near at hand, he selected the best horse, and mounting, struck out in a southerly direction. The intelligence of the shooting was immediately carried to Oakland, and a large posse of mounted men at once started in pursuit. They soon came in sight of the Mexican, and when within rifle shot they opened a fusillade on the fugitive, who, turning in his saddle, returned the fire. His aim proved deadly, two of his shots taking effect. The leader of the party, M. P. Johnson, fell from his horse, dead, with a bullet in his brain, and Charles Wasserman received a bullet in his leg. The pursuers, however, still pursued him closely. Seeing that escape was impossible, the cowboy, on reaching the barn of Charles Johnson, dismounted, and before they could get in range, was safely inside. In this frail, but for the time impregnable, fortress, Wright made one of the most desperate single-handed fights on record. Knowing that surrender meant instant and certain death, and amply supplied with ammunition and arms, he held at bay a crowd at times numbering 300 men.

Hardly had he entered the barn when his pursuers came within range, and, surrounding the structure, a deadly fusillade commenced. The murderer was armed with a revolver and a Winchester rifle, and the cracks between the boards served as loopholes, through which he kept up a continuous and deadly fire. From both outside and inside the firing became furious. One of Wright's first shots brought down the horse of F. F. Parlor. In quick succession two other horses were shot from under their riders. In a rash moment the imprisoned man exposed himself and was shot through the leg.

From eight in the evening until twelve o'clock the firing was almost incessant. At midnight the bombardment was suspended until morning, but no one slept. All through the night armed recruits from all parts of the county came to reinforce the besiegers. The crowd was under the direction of the sheriff, who disposed them so that every avenue of escape from the barn was watched.

To attempt to starve him out was known to be a task of many days, as the barn contained, besides thirteen head of horses and mules, a number of milch cows and hundreds of chickens. All day the crowds surged and circled about the barn, but were careful to keep beyond the range of the Mexican's deadly rifle. A wagon load of provisions arrived during the morning, and commissary headquarters were established at the Johnson residence. Although the furious firing of the previous evening was not renewed, a number of shots were exchanged and several of the besiegers were slightly wounded.

Upon the approach of the night, as there was no moon and the sky cloudy, it was decided, to prevent all chance of Wright's escape in the darkness, to fire haystacks on three sides of the barn. This, it was believed, would also furnish an opportunity to ignite the barn on the dark side in case the prisoner did not surrender. At ten o'clock the stacks were fired, and the crowd awaited developments. The prisoner, however, was still defiant, as was evidenced by shots from the barn whenever anyone approached the structure in the light of the blazing haystacks.

Then it was that it was decided to fire the barn. A dozen volunteered to start the fire, but as it was considered highly desirable to attract as little attention as possible, it was agreed that only two should go. Accordingly two of the shrewdest men in the crowd, supplying themselves with hay, matches, and a can of kerosene, started on the perilous mission. At first they went directly opposite from the barn, in order to deceive the Mexican in case he should observe them. To further distract his attention from them, just as the men were about to start the crowd began a rattling fusillade on the barn, and kept it up so fiercely that it sounded as if a pitched battle were in progress.

Reaching a point several yards beyond the light of the burning haystacks, the two men stole cautiously toward the barn. It was considered too great a risk, however, to attempt to reach the barn itself, and, having safely arrived at a long cowshed which joined it on the dark side, they poured kerosene on several spots in the structure, and, laying bunches of hay beneath each of them, touched them off in quick succession.

The flames shot up instantly, and in a moment the whole side of the cowshed was on fire. The two men then started on a dead run back to the camp of the besiegers. They had not a moment to spare, for hardly had they applied the matches when three shots, fired almost simultaneously, struck the shed. The men, however, were in the dark, and succeeded in safely rejoining their companions. Then the firing ceased.

Presently a shot was heard within the barn.

"He has killed himself!" exclaimed several in the crowd.

The flames spread rapidly up one side of the barn and along the roof. The bellowing of the cattle and the neighing and plunging of the horses could be heard above the roaring and crackling of their burning prison. But there was no sound from the Mexican. The opinion rapidly gained ground that he had shot himself, and several proposed that an attempt be made to enter the barn and save some of the live stock. Without taking the precaution to keep out of the light which the other two had done, the crowd made a rush toward the fire. They had proceeded about half way when the side of the barn which they were facing tottered and fell.

"Come back! Come back! There's the Greaser!" shouted several men in the rear.

The tableau revealed as the great framework crashed to the ground for a moment rooted the spectators to the spot. On three sides and overhead were the roaring flames, and in the center lay, or half reclined, the Mexican. Grasped in his right hand was the rifle which had done such deadly work. His long, matted hair hung across his face. He seemed in the last agonies of suffocation. Simultaneously with the shouts of the crowds he raised his head. With a dazed, uncertain movement his left hand swept the hair from his face. Then, as if suddenly realizing his surroundings, rifle in hand, he struggled to his feet. But as he brought the weapon to his shoulder his wounded leg gave way. Raising on his knees he once more lifted his rifle, steadied himself for an instant, and fired. Even in the death throes his aim proved unerring, and as he fell forward on his funeral pyre one of the besieging party dropped to the earth.

A hundred bullets answered the parting shot from the Mexican's rifle, but the flames quickly hid his body from view. The tragedy was ended. Soon the barn was but a heap of smoldering ruins. The last victim of the desperado's aim, Charles Wise, was carried to the farmhouse in a dying condition. It was now daylight, and a search was immediately made for the Mexican's body. It was found in a large pile of oats. Both arms were burned off and a part of both legs. The crowd was bent on taking the corpse and feeding it to the hogs, but the sheriff finally prevailed on them to give up the idea, and it was buried in a contiguous cornfield.

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